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The relation of childhood depressive symptoms to behavior during a speech task

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This study examined the relation of child depressive symptoms to their observed behaviors during a speech performance task. Previous work (Mavers & Bell, 2005) has demonstrated that children's anxiety was related to several observed difficulties during a speech task, including rate of speech that was too fast or too slow to be easily understood, short utterance lengths, substantial pauses in responding, soft voice volume, unclear speech content, and low eye contact. Because children's anxiety and depression share many behavioral features, the present study extended this work by examining whether similar relations would be evident for child depressive symptoms. A sample of 79 third to sixth grade children completed self-report measures of anxiety and depression, and then completed a 5-minute speech task, which was videotaped and coded for several verbal and motor behaviors. Parents and teachers also reported on children's anxiety and depressive symptoms. Results indicated that child and parent reports of child depression were related to difficulties in two verbal behavior categories: children with more depressive symptoms demonstrated more awkward rates of speech and less clear speech content than children with fewer depressive symptoms. In contrast, for teacher reports, observed behaviors tended to be related to the absence of externalizing symptoms rather than the presence of internalizing (e.g., depression) symptoms. Implications of our findings and future directions are discussed.