Externalizing Behavior and Anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorders

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between externalizing behaviors and social disability in high functioning youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and examined the relationship between externalizing behaviors and anxiety. Social disability and externalizing behavior were significantly correlated, r=50, p<.05. Although statistically nonsignificant, highly anxious youth tended to show more aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Social interaction deficits are a core feature of ASD and are commonly associated with externalizing behavior (EB) problems present in 50-70% of younger children with ASD. Although aggression is prevalent in lower functioning children with ASD, little is known about the its phenomenology in older, higher functioning children with ASD. There is reason to believe that it is indeed a problem and that EB may be related to social disability and anxiety.

Social anxiety disorder and ODD are the most common co-occurring disorders in children with ASD. Social difficulties may increase the risk for peer rejection and social isolation. Social disability associated with ASD could lead to anxiety, which may manifest itself through EB. This pilot study explores the occurrence of EB in higher functioning children with ASD and assesses how social disability and anxiety contribute to EB.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS:
• Twenty children and adolescents (18 male), receiving services through an outpatient clinic for youth with ASD.
• All participants had clinical diagnoses of ASD confirmed by the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule.3

MEASURES:
• Social deficits in ASD were measured by the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS).4
• Anxiety symptoms were measured by the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC).5
• Aggression was measured through the externalizing behavior index on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL).6

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>IQ</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>92.24</td>
<td>14.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>MASC</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>52.90</td>
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<td>SRS</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>100</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>60.75</td>
<td>18.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: T-scores are given for the MASC, CBCL and SRS
*Externalizing Behavior Scale

RESULTS

• CBCL externalizing behavior scores ranged from 40 to 75 (M=60.75).
• MASC total T scores ranged from 28 to 83 (M=52.90). Five children (25% of sample) earned MASC total scores in the clinical range (T score > 65).
• There was a significant positive correlation between the total SRS raw score and the externalizing behavior raw score from the CBCL, r=.50, p<.05; indicating that degree of social disability is associated with externalizing behavior.
• On average, children with elevated MASC scores (i.e., those in the highest quartile; M=67.75, SD=21.41) showed more externalizing behavior than the children with lower levels of anxiety (i.e., those in the lowest quartile; M=47.50, SD=13.08), though this difference was not significant.

CONCLUSIONS

• In higher functioning children and adolescents with ASD, aggression was significantly correlated with social disability.
• Although non-significant, participants with higher levels of anxiety exhibited more aggressive behaviors.
• These findings highlight the need to further explore relationships among social disability, externalizing behaviors, and anxiety in this population.
• It is plausible that the awareness of being socially unskilled can lead to anxiety and trigger aggression.
• An understanding of the phenomenology of aggression and anxiety in this population will be imperative to effectively treating social disability and increasing quality of life in youth with ASD.
• The study’s main limitation was the small sample size. Descriptive data indicate that had the sample size been larger, there likely would have been more robust findings.
• Another limitation was that participants were not separated according to their diagnosis.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

55th Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA., February 18-21, 2009
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