

Behavioral and Emotion Disorder in Childhood: A Review

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Abstract

Behavioral problems among school going children are of significant concern to teachers and parents. These are known to have both immediate and long-term unfavorable consequences. Mental health problems in children and adolescents include several types of emotional and behavioral disorders, including disruptive, depression, anxiety, and pervasive developmental (autism) disorders, characterized as either internalizing or externalizing problems. Disruptive behavioral problems such as temper tantrums, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional, defiant, or conduct disorders are the most common behavioral problems in preschool and school age children. Childhood behavior and emotional problems with their related disorders have significant negative impacts on the individual, the family, and the society. They are commonly associated with poor academic, occupational, and psychosocial functioning. Despite the high prevalence, studies on psychiatric morbidity among school children are lacking in our country. Identification and management of mental health problems in primary care settings such as routine Paediatric clinic or Family Medicine/General Practitioner surgery are cost-effective because of their several desirable characteristics that make it acceptable to children and young people (e.g., no stigma, in local setting, and familiar providers). This review provides prevalence, etiology, neurobiology, complication, assessment, diagnosis, and management of behavioral and emotional disorders in children.

Keywords: Anxiety, autism, challenging behavior, childhood behavioral disorders, depression, emotional disorder

INTRODUCTION

Globally, nearly 20% of children and adolescents are affected by multiple intellectual disabilities.^[1,2] Globally, nearly 20% of children and adolescents are affected by multiple intellectual disabilities. The alarming increases in the number of children and youths in low and middle-income countries leaves this population with insufficient care on the part of mental health providers, inadequate facilities, and weak services to manage their psychiatric health problems.^[3]

Mental health disorders (MHD) are very common in childhood and they include emotional-obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety, depression, disruptive oppositional defiance disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), or developmental (speech/language delay,

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intellectual disability) disorders or pervasive (autistic spectrum) disorders. [4] Emotional and behavioral problems (EBP) or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) can also be classified as either "internalizing" (emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety) or "externalizing" (disruptive behaviors such as ADHD and CD). The terminologies of "problems" and "disorders" are interchangeably used throughout this article.

Although nonsense-free, defiant, or impulsive behavior is sometimes viewed as natural, extremely difficult, or challenging activities outside of normal age and development, such as erratic, persistent, and/or disruptive tonsils and serious outbreaks of temperatures, a lack of temper, the destruction of products or property in children at pre-school. Community studies have identified that more than 80% of preschoolers have mild tantrums sometimes but a smaller proportion, <10% will have daily tantrums, regarded as normative misbehaviors at this age. [5,6] Challenging behaviors and emotional difficulties are more likely to be recognized as "problems" rather than "disorders" during the 1st 2 years of life. [7]

Later childhood mental issues including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) appear to occur.

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Parents or other carers also find it difficult to identify them early, because too many children lack sufficient vocabulary and understanding to intelligibly communicate their emotions. [8] Many physicians and practitioners often find escape from the intensity of the prolonged emotions that must be treated as disorders from evolving natural emotions (e.g., fears and weeping). [9] Chronic medical conditions including atopic dermatitis, obesity, diabetes, and asthma are also associated with mental issues, including a bad eating habit and self-image. [10-12]

Prevalence

The issue of the methodologies of research based on subjective judgments and different concepts used is that an accurate evaluation of different childhood EBPs is difficult. According to most studies, 10–20% children and young people (CYP) are affected by MHD each year and the rates for income, resident status, education, and community support among racial and ethnic groups are similar. Poverty and low socioeconomic status, however, are threats that seem to increase the population-based MHD rate. [13] A 2001 WHO report [14] indicated the 6-month prevalence rate for any MHD in CYP, up to age 17 years, to be 20.9%, with disruptive behavior disorders (DBD) at 10.3%, second only to anxiety disorders at 13%. About 5% of CYP in the general population suffer from depression at any given point in time, which is more prevalent among girls (54%). [15]

An anterior study carried out in 1999, by the National Statistics Office of 7977 interviews of parents, children, and teachers in British Mental Health in 1999 and 2004 found that 6% of the cases of behavioral disorder involving MHD (aged 5–16 years) are 6%, 4% are linked to emotional disorders (depression or anxiety), and 1.5% are related to hyperkinetic disorder.^[15] A similar survey in the United States between 2005 and 2011, the National survey of children's health involving 78042 households, indicated that 4.6% of CYP aged 3–17 years had a history DBD, with prevalence twice as high among boys as among girls (6.2% vs. 3.0%), anxiety (4.7%), depression (3.9%), and autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (1.1%). Reported prevalence rates for disruptive mood dysregulation disorder range from 0.8% to 3.3% with the highest rate in preschool children.^[16]

ETIOLOGY

The exact causes of various childhood EBPs are unknown. Several studies have established different combinations of genetic predisposition and adverse environmental factors which increase the risk of these disorders developing. This involves factors such as perinatal, maternal, family, family, parenting, social, and economic risks as well as personal risk.^[17] A developmental taxonomy theory has been proposed by Patterson *et al.*^[18] to help understand the mechanisms underlying early onset and course of conduct problems (CPs). They identified both prosocial and antisocial behavior, which

contributes towards the unintentional worsening of children's behavior issues, through non-contingent parental reactions. Parents' involvement in manipulative cycles will lead children to learn the operative significance of their abnormal behavior, (e.g., physical aggression), as a means of escaping and avoiding unnecessary experiences, which will eventually lead children and parents to use enhanced abnormality to achieve social objectives. This adverse child behavioral training combined with social rejection often lead to deviant peer affiliation and delinquency in adolescence [Figure 1].^[19]

NEUROBIOLOGY

Conflicting findings have been reported in the brain structural variations among CYP with EBPs using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies. The anatomical anomalies associated with DBD are most consistently recorded including decreased amygdala gray matter volume (GMV), frontal cortex, temporal lobes, and anterior insula that are part of a network that includes others' empathic concern. Reduced GMV along the superior temporal sulcus has also been found, particularly in girls.^[20] A decreased overall mean cortical thickness, thinning of the cingulate, and prefrontal cortices; and decreased gray matter density in different brain regions have been reported.^[21]

Many research studies on functional scans have documented subtle neurobiological changes in various parts of the CYP brain with EBPs. In hypothalamus, lower and higher parietal lobes, right amygdala, and anterior insula, improvements in the brain have been observed. [22] Functional MRI studies have demonstrated less activation in the temporal cortex in violent adult offenders [23] and in antisocial and psychopathic individuals [24] compared to non-aggressive offenders.

Reduced basal hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis activity has been reported in relation to childhood DBDs and exposure to abuse and neglect.^[25] High levels of prenatal testosterone exposure tend to be part of the dynamic etiology of EBDs. This explains higher prevalence of DBDs in men by enhancing their sensitivity to perinatal toxic conditions such as mother nicotine exposure and alcohol pregnancy.^[26]

COMPLICATIONS

EBDs in childhood, if left untreated, may have negative short-term and long-term effects on an individual's personal, educational, family, and later professional life. CD has been linked to failure to complete schooling, attaining poor school achievement, poor interpersonal relationships, particularly family breakup and divorce, and experience of long-term unemployment. DBPs in parents have been linked to the abuse of their offspring, thereby increasing their risk of developing CD.^[27,28] Children presenting with hyperactivity-inattention behaviors are more likely to have a more favorable educational outcome compared with those with aggression or oppositional behaviors.^[29,30]

Several studies have confirmed a strong relationship between early childhood EBPs and poor future long-term physical

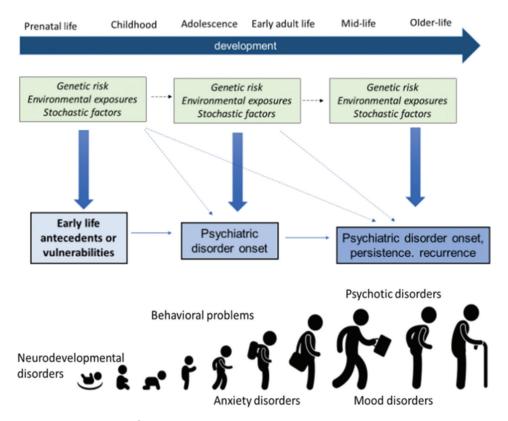


Figure 1: Psychiatric disorders in childhood: Onset and progression

and mental health outcomes. Chronic irritability in preschool children, CD and ODD in older children each may be predictive of any current and lifetime anxiety, depression, and DBDs in later childhood, mania, schizophrenia, OCD, major depressive disorder, and panic disorder. [31-33] Individuals on the adolescentonset CP path often consume more tobacco and illegal drugs and engage more often in risky sexual behavior, self-harm, and have increased risk of PTSD, than individuals without childhood CPs. They also frequently experience parenting difficulties, including over-reactivity, lax and inconsistent discipline, child physical punishment, and lower levels of parental warmth and sensitivity. [34,35] Approximately 40-50% of CYP with CD are at the risk of developing antisocial personality disorder in adulthood. Other potential complications include adverse mental and physical health outcomes, social justice system involvement including incarceration, substance use and abuse, alcoholism, homelessness, poverty, and domestic abuse.[36]

MANAGEMENT

Identification of appropriate treatment strategies depends on careful assessment of the prevailing symptoms, the family and caregiver's influences, wider socioeconomic environment, the child's developmental level, and physical health. It requires multi-level and multi-disciplinarian approaches that include professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, behavioral analysts, nurses, social care staff, speech and language therapists, educational staff, occupational therapists,

physiotherapists, pediatricians, and pharmacists. Use of pharmacotherapy is usually considered only in combination with psychological and other environmental interventions.^[37]

Holistic management strategies will include various combinations of several interventions such as child and family-focused psychological strategies including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), behavioral modification, and social communication enhancement techniques, parenting skills training and psychopharmacology. These strategies can play significant roles in the management of children with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, and social communication disorders. Effective alternative educational procedures also need to be implemented for the school age children and adolescents.

In early childhood, similar parenting strategies have been found useful to manage several apparently dissimilar EBPs (e.g., infant feeding or sleeping problems, preschool tantrums, disruptive, and various emotional problems). This may suggest that there is a common maintaining mechanism, which is probably related to poor self-regulation skills, involving the ability to control impulses and expressions of emotion.^[38]

Several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of various psychological and pharmacologic therapies in the management of childhood EBDs. A meta-analysis of thirty-six controlled trials, involving 3042 children (mean sample age, 4.7 years), evaluating the effect of psychosocial treatments including parenting programs on early DBPs, demonstrated large

and sustained effects (Hedges' g = 0.82), with the largest effects for general externalizing symptoms and problems of oppositionality and non-compliance, and were weakest, relatively speaking, for problems of impulsivity and hyperactivity.^[39]

The treatment of CD among CYP with callous-unemotional traits is still at early stages of research. The mainstay of management for CDs includes individual behavioral or cognitive therapy, psychotherapy, family therapy, and medications.^[40]

PARENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

Any challenging behavior from CYP is likely to elicit persistent negative reactions from many parents, using ineffective controlling strategies and a decrease in positive responses.^[41] There is evidence from published research that social-learning and behaviorally based parent training is capable of producing lasting improvement in children with callous-unemotional traits or CD, reducing externalizing problems for children with DBDs, leading to significant parent satisfaction, particularly when delivered early in childhood.[42-44] Pooled estimates from a review of 37 randomized controlled studies identified a statistically significant improvement on several rating scales among children with CD up to the age of 18 years. [45] A previous meta-analysis of 24 studies confirmed that parent-child interaction therapy demonstrated significantly larger effect sizes for reducing negative parent behaviors, negative child behaviors, and caregiver reports of child behavior problems than did most or all forms of Positive Parenting Programme (Triple P). [46] A recent Cochrane review of 13 studies confirmed the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of group-based parenting interventions for alleviating child CPs, enhancing parental mental health and parenting skills, at least in the short term. [47]

DIFFERENTIATED EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES

Research has focused on identifying alternative educational strategies that can be used to improve learning opportunities for children presenting with challenging behaviors from various causes. Supportive school strategies for children with EBDs have traditionally focused on classroom management, social skills and anger management, but many researchers have more recently argued that academically-focused interventions may be most effective. [48] Traditional school policies of suspending or expelling children with EBD can be harmful to them. Researchers have developed "step-by-step" guidelines for teachers to guide them in the selection and implementation of evidence-based strategies that have been identified as effective in increasing levels of engagement and achievement by children with EBD, including peer-assisted learning procedures, class-wide peer tutoring, self-management interventions, and tiered intervention systems – most notably Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. [49,50] There is increasing evidence to confirm that school-based interventions to address emerging DBPs produce significant reductions in both parent, self and teacher-reported internalizing and externalizing symptoms.^[51]

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) is an educational system designed for the management of children with Autism and related communication disorders. ^[52] There is some evidence that TEACCH programs also lead to some improvements in motor skills and cognitive measures. ^[53]

CHILD-FOCUSED PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

CBT is one of the most widely used non-pharmacologic treatments for individuals with emotional disorders, especially depression, and with individuals with behavioral problems including ASD.^[54] CBT integrates a combination of both cognitive and behavioral learning principles to encourage desirable behavior patterns. Research evidence from several trials^[55] provides strong support for the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral interventions among CYP with anxiety and depression. A recent study of child-focused CBT program introduced at schools has shown that it produces significant improvement in disruptive behaviors among children.^[56]

Self-esteem building strategies can help many children with EBDs, who often experience repeated failures at school and in their interactions with others. These children could be encouraged to identify and excel in their particular talents (such as sports) to help build their self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Prevention and management of EBD is not easy and it requires an integrated multidisciplinary effort by healthcare providers at different levels to be involved in the assessment, prevention and management of affected individuals, and also to provide social, economic, and psycho-emotional support to the affected families.

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