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## Risk-need assessment for youth with or at risk for conduct problems: introducing the assessment system ESTER

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### Abstract

This paper introduces ESTER, a research based and computerized risk-need assessment system for youths (0-18 years) with or at risk for conduct problems. The ESTER-system includes a screening tool/questionnaire (ESTER-screening) and a professional structured risk-need assessment instrument (ESTER-assessment). This article briefly presents the background and purpose of ESTER, and the risk and protective factors assessed. It also illustrates how the computerized system effectively helps in presenting results of single as well as repeated assessments, assisting the practitioner in tailoring suitable interventions.

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*Keywords:* Risk-need assessment, youth, antisocial behavior, conduct problems.

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### 1. Background – The importance of risk-need assessments in practice

To effectively help, guide, and council youths with or at risk for conduct problems, there is a need for practitioners to identify the specific risk and protective factors toward which interventions should be targeted. Indeed, research has shown that interventions that adhere to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity are more effective than interventions that do not (Andrews et al., 1990; Dowden & Andrews, 1999, 2002, 2003; Meerah et al., 2010). To be able to effectively adhere to these important principles one needs to conduct a risk-need assessment, in which a structured, research based instrument can be of service. Several instruments are already in use (e.g., EARL-20B/-21G; Augimeri, Koegl, Webster, & Levene, 2001; Levene et al., 2001, SAVRY; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2002), but suffer from some important shortcomings. For example, they do not offer a conjunct method for screening, they are not explicitly designed for repeated assessments, and they are not explicitly developed to be used by different kinds of professionals, authorities, and organizations that work with youths, to facilitate collaboration.

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## 2. ESTER – A new fourth generation risk-need assessment system

ESTER is an assessment system that includes a screening system: *ESTER-screening*, and a structured research-based professional risk-need instrument: *ESTER-assessment*. It is a risk-need assessment system for youths (0-18 years) with or at risk for conduct problems (antisocial/criminal behavior).

### 2.1. *ESTER-screening*

ESTER-screening is a four-page questionnaire that focuses on youth and family strengths and difficulties with a primary focus on risk factors for conduct problems. The same risk factors that are more thoroughly assessed in ESTER-assessment are also assessed in ESTER-screening (see Table 1), but in a more brief format. ESTER-screening exists for three different informants: Care-givers, professionals (e.g., teachers), and the youths themselves, from about 10 years of age and above. For each informant group, there are two versions of the questionnaire, where one includes both youth and family risk factors and the other focuses on youth risk factors only. The main purpose of ESTER-screening is to screen for whether a more in depth or qualified assessment is needed. The information gathered through ESTER-screening can also be included as a part of that more qualified assessment. For example, if a child in preschool or school has started to exhibit behavioral problems, a professional can use ESTER-screening to collect information from teachers and parents about risk factors as a basis for decisions on how to move further to help the child and family.

### 2.2. *ESTER-assessment*

ESTER-assessment is a structured risk-need assessment instrument currently available in Swedish and English. It belongs to the fourth generation of risk-need assessment instruments in that (1) it is structured, research based, and explicitly developed to be used from first assessment/intake to case closure; (2) it provides support for decisions for interventions rather than acts as an actuarial instrument; and (3) it should be used for preventive/intervening purposes rather than primarily for prediction (see Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006).

There is an ESTER-manual (Andershed & Andershed, 2008) which describes the background and purpose of ESTER and how it should be used. It also describes all the risk and protective factors that are assessed in ESTER-assessment. To conduct an ESTER-assessment, the so-called ESTER-assessment booklet is used.

ESTER-assessment includes 12 risk factors and 7 protective factors, see Table 1. These factors have been selected through an extensive research review, and represent behaviors and characteristics of relationships that in empirical research have been identified as being related to the development of conduct problems (see e.g., Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Farrington, 2005; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Moffitt, 2003; Patterson, 1982; Shaw, Bell, & Gilliom, 2000). The factors are grouped in four categories: Youth risk factors, Family risk factors, Youth protective factors, and Family protective factors (see Table 1).

The factors included have been chosen because most of them can be regarded as proximal rather than distal, meaning that they are more directly related to the conduct problem behavior pattern of the youth. All factors included are also potentially changeable (i.e., dynamic) which make them useful for practice and can lead to a constructive focus in interventions, and communicates the important message that the problematic behavior patterns exhibited for example by the youth, is possible to change.

ESTER-assessment is tailored to be used by professionals and organizations in the broadest sense, working with assessments of and interventions for youth, for example by teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, or police officers, and in preschools, schools, youth centers, juvenile justice institutions or health care. Each risk factor is explicitly defined, and the items are written in a neutral, behavior-focused language that can be accepted and grasped by all professions regardless of previous education. This increases the possibilities for cross-professional or organizational collaboration, which often is necessary for youths with conduct problems and their families. No previous education or specific background is needed to use ESTER-screening and ESTER-assessment. A one-day introduction combined with individual studies of the material is recommended.

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