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Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

Journal homepage: <http://ees.elsevier.com/RASD/default.asp>



Risk factors for challenging behaviors among 157 children with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 September 2008

Accepted 26 September 2008

Keywords:

Autism

Intellectual disability

Challenging behavior

Risk factors

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify risk factors for the occurrence of challenging behavior along with the specific topographies of challenging behavior shown by a sample of children with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland. The occurrence of challenging behavior was examined in comparison with the following variables: gender, age, level of intellectual disability, type of intervention and the hours of intervention being received. The Behavior Problems Inventory – 01 was used to gather data for 157 participants. Results indicated that 64.3% ($n = 101$) of the participants showed challenging behavior, with a high co-occurrence across categories of behavior. The present study found no correlation between age and gender and the presence of challenging behavior. Findings in relation to level of intellectual disability, type and hours of intervention received are discussed.

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Over the past 30 years, an extensive body of literature has accumulated concerning the nature, extent and impact of challenging behaviors shown by individual with intellectual disabilities (McClintock, Hall, & Oliver, 2003). Evidence from studies in Britain and the United States indicate that 10–15% of people with intellectual disabilities emit challenging behavior (Holden & Gitlesen, 2006). The term ‘challenging behavior’ has been defined as “culturally abnormal behavior(s) of such intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behavior which is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities (Emerson, 2001, p. 3).

[☆] This research was conducted by the first author under the supervision of the second and third authors in partial fulfillment of the requirements for her MA degree in ABA at NUI, Galway.

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Challenging behavior is often associated with a range of negative personal and social consequences. Such behaviors may significantly impair the physical and mental health and or quality of life of the person themselves, those who care for them, those who live in close proximity, and in extreme cases may even result in death (Mukaddes & Topcu, 2006; Nissen & Haveman, 1997). However, the consequences of challenging behaviors can go far beyond their immediate physical impact. People with challenging behaviors are significantly more likely to be excluded from community-based services and be retained in institutional settings (Borthwick-Duffy, Eyman & White, 1987). People are also likely to be excluded from services provided within these settings (Oliver, Murphy & Corbett, 1987). Within the community, challenging behaviors may serve to limit the development of social relationships and reduce the opportunities to participate in community-based activities (Anderson, Larkin, Hill & Chen, 1992). Challenging behaviors may also serve as an obstacle to learning new skills particularly for those based in school settings (Chadwick, Piroth, Walker, Bernard & Taylor, 2000). This in turn can lead to a coercive trap whereby the individual does not learn novel behaviors to replace challenging behaviors and as a result continues to emit the problem behaviors.

The term 'challenging behavior' is used to describe a broad class of unusual behaviors shown by individuals with intellectual disabilities. They include aggression, destructiveness, self-injurious behavior (SIB), stereotyped behaviors and a range of other behaviors (Emerson, 2001). Emerson et al. (2001a) reported that the main forms of challenging behaviors shown are SIB and aggression, with the prevalence of these increasing into teenage years. Stereotyped behaviors are often viewed as the least problematic of challenging behaviors, receiving less intensive intervention than aggression or SIB or often receiving no treatment at all (Matson, Benavidez, Compton, Paclawskyj, & Baglio, 1996). However, engagement in stereotypic behavior also produces negative social consequences, particularly by interfering with skill acquisition and may be a pre-cursor to SIB (Morrison & Rozales-Ruiz, 1997).

Researchers have indicated that individuals who display challenging behavior, often show more than one form. Emerson et al. (2001a) found that between one and a half and two thirds of people identified as showing challenging behavior did so in two or more forms. Similarly, Borthwick-Duffy (1994) found that from those identified as displaying challenging behavior, 25% did so in more than one of three possible areas, those being aggression, SIB and property destruction. In addition to the co-occurrence of challenging behavior across two forms, people are also more likely to show multiple topographies of these forms of challenging behavior (Emerson, 2001). Harris (1993) reported that the most prevalent forms of aggression shown by 168 individuals were punching, slapping, pushing or pulling (51%), kicking (24%), pinching and scratching (21%). The most common forms of SIB shown by people with intellectual disabilities include repeated self-biting, punching or slapping; hitting head against objects, hitting other parts of the body or self scratching (Emerson et al., 2001b).

Additional studies have extended the investigation of prevalence and forms of challenging behavior. Factors associated with challenging behavior, or risk factors, have also been investigated (Holden & Gitlesen, 2006). The identification of such risk factors, both personal and environmental, is important if preventative measures are to be targeted appropriately. Many researchers have examined the occurrence of challenging behavior in comparison with variables such as age, gender and level of intellectual disability (Tyrrer et al., 2006).

In relation to gender, boys and men are more likely to be identified as showing challenging behavior than girls and women (Emerson, 2001). In a study on physical aggression towards others, Tyrrer et al. (2006), found a higher prevalence of aggression in men than in women. This mirrors findings by Oliver et al. (1987) who found that men were more likely to emit aggressive behaviors and property destruction than SIB. However, many studies have shown that gender was not a risk factor for challenging behavior. Baghdadli, Pascal, Grisi & Aussilloux (2003) reported that SIB concerns nearly half of the children studied without gender effects. Similarly, Chadwick et al. (2000) found that there were no significant differences on any challenging behavior measures (SIB or aggression) taken between boys and girls.

The prevalence of challenging behaviors appears to increase with age during childhood, reach a peak during the age range 15–34 and then decline (Oliver et al., 1987). Holden and Gitlesen (2006) found that age was clearly associated with challenging behavior, mainly in that more challenging behavior was common among adults under 40 years and less challenging behavior was common

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