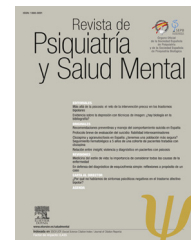




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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Prevalence of emotional and behavioral symptomatology in Spanish adolescents[☆]



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract

Introduction: The main purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of symptoms of an emotional and behavioral nature, as well as prosocial type capabilities, measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, in non-clinical adolescents.

Method: The final sample was composed of a total of 508 students, 208 male (40.9%). The age of participants ranged from 11 to 18 years ($M = 13.91$ years; $SD = 1.71$).

Results: The results show that a significant number of adolescents self-reported emotional and behavioral problems. The mean scores of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire subscales varied according the gender and age of the adolescents.

Conclusions: In the present study, the prevalence of psychological difficulties among adolescents was similar to that reported in other national and international studies. In view of these results, there is a need to develop programs for the early detection of these types of problems in schools in children and adolescents ages.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Strengths and
Difficulties
Questionnaire;
Adolescentes;
Prevalencia;
Emocional;
Comportamental

Prevalencia de síntomas emocionales y comportamentales en adolescentes españoles

Resumen

Introducción: El propósito principal del estudio fue examinar la prevalencia de los síntomas emocionales y comportamentales así como las capacidades de tipo prosocial, medidos con el *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*, en adolescentes no clínicos.

Método: La muestra final estuvo compuesta por un total de 508 participantes españoles, 208 hombres (40,9%). La edad de los participantes osciló entre 11 y 18 años ($M = 13,91$ años; $DT = 1,71$).

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Resultados: Un importante número de adolescentes informaron de sintomatología afectiva y comportamental. Las puntuaciones medias de las subescalas del *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* variaron de forma estadísticamente significativa en función del género y la edad de los adolescentes.

Conclusiones: La prevalencia de dificultades de tipo psicológico entre adolescentes fue similar a la informada en estudios previos, tanto en el panorama nacional como internacional. A la vista de los resultados, existe una necesidad de desarrollar programas de detección temprana de este tipo de síntomas emocionales y comportamentales en los centros escolares y/o asistenciales en población infanto-juvenil.

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Introduction

Mental health problems in children and adolescents seriously affect not only the individuals themselves but also the family, the school environment and the community.¹ Over the last 2 decades interest in identifying children and adolescents at the risk of having some type of emotional and/or behavioral disorder has increased.² In spite of the efforts expended on this early detection, several studies suggest that only a minority of the child and youth population with intervention needs in the area of mental health enter in direct contact with specialised services.^{3,4} The strategies for primary prevention (preventing the appearance of symptoms) and for secondary prevention (identifying and treating asymptomatic individuals that have developed risk factors or subclinical features, but whose clinical condition has not yet appeared) are still underdeveloped in the child and youth population.⁵

According to a national survey on mental health carried out in Spain,⁶ 22.1% of Spanish children and adolescents from 4 to 15 years old present the risk of having a mental or behavioral disorder (e.g., behavior problems). Child and youth epidemiological studies also carried out in our territory yield similar prevalence rates for the different emotional and behavioral problems,⁷⁻¹⁰ which resembled those found in the general population.^{11,12} These results also coincide with those found in epidemiological studies in other countries. International prevalence rates for mental disorders in children and adolescents, classified according to the diagnostic criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) and/or the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Edition (*Clasificación internacional de enfermedades, 10 edición*, CIE-10), are approximately 5% and 20% of the population,¹³⁻¹⁷ with the mean rate being on the order of 15%.^{18,19}

As can be seen, a high percentage of children and adolescents present or will present a mental disorder at some time throughout their lives. This will cause a clear impact, not only on the person, academic, family and social spheres, but also at the healthcare and economic levels.^{14,15,20} In addition, many mental disorders seem to begin in childhood and/or adolescence. Approximately 50% start before the age of 15 years and, in many cases, this symptomatology remains stable until adulthood.^{13,21-23} What is more, it should be remembered that the presence of affective

and behavioral symptoms at subclinical level increases the later risk of developing a serious mental disorder.²⁴⁻²⁷ Based on these prevalence data, and bearing in mind the economic and social costs that mental health problems generate in this segment of the population,^{14,15} it is undoubtedly highly important to perform reliable and valid detection and assessment of the emotional and behavioral symptoms in the child and youth population. Precise assessment lets us understand the prevalence rates of mental health better and makes it possible to improve the management of economic and/or healthcare resources.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)²⁸ (*Cuestionario de Capacidades and Dificultades*), in its self-report version, is a measurement tool used for screening of behavioral and emotional symptoms, as well as for the evaluation of prosocial capacities. The use of the SDQ makes it possible to obtain reliable, valid information on the expression of emotional and behavioral symptoms; at the same time, it is a brief, simple and easily-administered questionnaire for use in the child and youth population.^{29,30}

Emotional and behavioral symptoms assessed using the SDQ seem to vary based on gender and age of the adolescents. Similar data are found in epidemiological studies with other measurement instruments.^{13,33} As for gender, females obtain higher mean scores than males in emotional symptoms and prosocial behavior; in contrast, males obtain higher mean scores than females in behavior problems, hyperactivity and relationship problems.³⁴⁻⁴⁴ With respect to age, results are not conclusive yet. Some studies found greater emotional and behavioral symptoms as age increased,^{35,36,38,42} while others showed an inverse tendency,^{40,45} or did not find any kind of link.⁴⁶

Until now, in Spain few empirical studies have been carried out that give information on the prevalence of symptoms of emotional and behavioral type measured using the SDQ. Within this research context, the main objective of this study was to examine the prevalence rates of emotional and behavioral symptomatology, using the SDQ,²⁸ in a sample of adolescents from the general Spanish population. Likewise, we analysed the expression of the affective and behavioral symptoms and of behavior and prosocial capacities based on gender and age. Studying the prevalence rates of emotional and behavioral symptoms provides us with better understanding of child and youth psychopathology and makes it possible to improve public health systems at the level of early detection and intervention, along with

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