



Research Paper

Emotional and behavioural needs in children with specific language impairment and in children with autism spectrum disorder: The importance of pragmatic language impairment

Wenche Andersen Helland^{a,b,*}, Turid Helland^b^a Section of Research and Innovation, Helse Fonna Health Authority, Norway^b Department of Biological and Medical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Jonas Liesvei 91, 5009 Bergen, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Background: Language problems may negatively affect children's behaviour and have detrimental effects on the development of peer-relations.

Aims: We investigated and compared emotional and behavioural profiles in children with SLI and in children with ASD aged 6–15 years and explored to what extent pragmatic language problems contributed to the emotional and behavioural needs (EBN) in these clinical groups.

Methods and procedures: The ASD group consisted of 23 children (19 boys; 4 girls) and the SLI group consisted of 20 children (18 boys; 2 girls). In order to assess EBN and language abilities, the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Children's Communication Checklist – 2 (CCC-2) were filled out by parents.

Outcomes and results: Our main findings were that although EBN was common in both groups; the children in the ASD group were significantly impaired relative to the children in the SLI group. However, in both groups pragmatic language problems were found to be significantly associated with EBN.

Implications: A comprehensive assessment of EBN as well as pragmatic language abilities should be an integral part of the assessment procedure. Considering the substantial influence of pragmatic language abilities on social function and in resolving interpersonal conflicts with peers further development of therapy plans and interventions targeting pragmatics is strongly needed.

What this paper adds?

Emotional and behavioural needs (EBN) have been reported both in children with specific language impairment (SLI) and in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to a larger extent than what is commonly found in their typically developing peers. However, few studies have directly compared these clinical groups with respect to their emotional and behaviour profiles or investigated the extent to which pragmatic language problems may contribute to EBN. This study contributes with information showing that as measured by the Strength and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ), children with ASD are significantly impaired relative to children with SLI on most scales as well as on the total difficulties score. In both groups peer-problems are prominent with the majority of children scoring in borderline/abnormal range. Furthermore, our findings indicate that pragmatic language impairment contributes significantly to the reported EBN in children with SLI as well as in children with ASD. Thus a broad assessment of mental health and pragmatic language abilities is considered crucial in the treatment and management of children in both groups.

* Corresponding author at: Stord Hospital, Tysevegen 64, 5416 Stord, Norway.

E-mail address: wenche.andersen.helland@helse-fonna.no (W.A. Helland).

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1. Introduction

Children with developmental disorders such as specific language impairment (SLI) and autism spectrum disorders (ASD) appear to be more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural difficulties than typically developing children (Conti-Ramsden, Mok, Pickles, & Durkin, 2013; Helland, Helland, & Heiman, 2014; Snowling, Bishop, Stothard, Chipchase, & Kaplan, 2006), and mounting evidence points to a strong association between language impairment and behaviour problems (Cross, 2011; Helland, Lundervold, Heiman, & Posserud, 2014). It has long been debated whether overlap in aetiology, language profiles and behavioural phenomenology exist between children with SLI and children with ASD (Bishop, 2008; Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2003); reviews are presented in Bishop (2010) and Tomblin (2011). Although traditionally regarded as two distinct disorders, similarities between them are commonly reported and in some individuals different combinations of symptoms will present (Durkin, Conti-Ramsden & Simkin, 2012). However, studies directly comparing emotional and behaviour profiles in children with SLI and children with ASD are scarce. Socioemotional wellbeing link to communicative competence and children's ability to form friendships and develop good peer-relations relies heavily on their language competence (Im-Bolter & Cohen, 2007).

SLI is a neurodevelopmental disorder, affecting language skills with an estimated prevalence of 5–7% of the population (Leonard, 2014; Tomblin et al., 1997). Although no gold standard exists for diagnosing SLI, this is the most common term used to describe otherwise typically developing children exhibiting significant deficits in language abilities with no known cause (Bishop, 2014; Leonard, 2014). It is important to note however, that SLI constitute a rather heterogeneous category varying both in severity and profile of disorder (Bishop, 2006). Most cases of SLI are diagnosed in childhood, however, considerable evidence suggest that these children do not outgrow their language difficulties; rather the majority continue to have long-term difficulties persisting into adulthood (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2013). Although traditionally regarded as a “pure” language disorder, children with SLI have shown to be at elevated risk for social exclusion, academic failure and emotional and behavioural difficulties (Conti-Ramsden & Durkin, 2015). Prevalence rates of behaviour and emotional needs (EBN) as high as 35–50% has been reported in samples of SLI (Yew & O’Kearney, 2013). Thus compared to typically developing peers, adolescents with SLI present with clinically important increases in the severity of diverse emotional and behavioural symptoms and more often also show clinical levels of these problems (Yew & O’Kearney, 2013). Elevated rates of externalizing as well as internalizing difficulties have been found (Charman, Ricketts, Dockrell, Lindsay, & Palikara, 2015). In a longitudinal study of children with a history of SLI St Clair, Pickles, Durkin and Conti-Ramsden (2011) found that hyperactivity, conduct and emotional problems decreased from childhood to adolescence while problems with peer relations increased.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder with an estimated prevalence of about 1% characterized by social-communication deficits and repetitive/restricted behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Matson & Neal, 2010). However, considerably heterogeneity exists in children with ASD; with variability in symptoms presentation as well as in functional abilities (Nylander, Holmqvist, Gustafson, & Gillberg, 2013). Co-occurring conditions, including language and learning problems, are commonly reported in clinical as well as in population –based samples (Carlsson et al., 2013; Helland, Biringier, Helland, & Heiman, 2012; Posserud, Hysing, Helland, Gillberg, & Lundervold, 2016) and these problems are expected to contribute to impairment as well as to poor functional outcome. This is in line with The Early Symptomatic Syndromes Eliciting Neurodevelopmental Clinical Examination (ESSENCE) framework presented by Gillberg (2010), suggesting that a range of neurodevelopmental difficulties tend to appear together and that sharing of symptoms and co-existing problems across diagnostic groups are the rule rather than the exception in the field of child psychiatry. Behaviour problems negatively affecting family and school function are common among children with ASD (De Giacomo et al., 2016) and prevalence rates of EBN within this group ranging 50–75% have been reported (Charman et al., 2015; Totsika, Hasting, Emerson, Lancaster, & Berridge, 2011). In a total population sample Posserud et al. (2016) found that more than 92% of children screened positive for ASD had a minimum of two other co-existing problems. Language and learning problems, emotional problems and inattention/hyperactivity problems were most commonly reported.

The intersecting areas of language; form, content and use (pragmatics) are all crucial for communicative competence. Thus, problems within any of these areas may negatively affect children's behaviour (Spanoudis, Natsopoulos, & Panayiotou, 2007). Pragmatics may be defined as the ability to use and understand language in social context; beyond understanding and expressing word meaning in correct phonological and grammatical forms (Bloom & Lahey, 1978; Fujiki & Brinton, 2009; Turkstra et al., 2016). According to Gibson, Adams, Lockton and Green (2013) pragmatic language impairments may have detrimental effects on the development of peer-relations. Donno, Parker, Gilmour and Skuse (2010) argued that these problems should be considered a contributory factor to behavioural problems in primary school children. In line with this Ketelaars, Cuperus, Jansonius and Verhoeven (2010) identified a strong connection between pragmatic language impairment and behaviour problems in a Dutch community sample of preschool children and Helland, Lundervold et al. (2014) found that language-, emotional- and peer-problems in childhood significantly predicted pragmatic language impairments in a group of adolescents with behavioural problems. All these findings underline the close association between pragmatic abilities and social functioning. Pragmatic language abilities are considered universally impaired in ASD, but impaired structural language abilities have also been identified in the majority of these children (Gorman et al., 2016). Although impaired structural language abilities are commonly considered the area of most concern in SLI, these children and adolescents may also experience substantial difficulties with pragmatics (Bishop, 2003; Helland, Helland et al., 2014). In a study of 7–11 year old children with behaviour causing concern at school Mackie and Law (2010) found that approximately two thirds had significant pragmatic language difficulties whereas structural language difficulties on their own were not associated with EBN. A recent study by Charman et al. (2015) compared levels of EBN in 5–13-year-old children with ASD and children with language impairment (LI) using the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). They found that both diagnostic groups showed similar and highly elevated levels of emotional, conduct and hyperactivity problems, while the ASD

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