Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder severity, diagnosis, & later academic achievement in a national sample

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Social Science Research (June 2016)  
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssrresearch.2016.06.018

Abstract

Although 11% (6.4 million) American children are diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the role of ADHD severity in shaping the association between ADHD diagnosis and academic achievement is not understood. Using a nationally-representative sample of 7,830 U.S. kindergartners from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, we use regression and propensity score matching to compare diagnosed (N = 350) and undiagnosed children who are cognitively, behaviorally, and demographically similar. Diagnosed children with less severe ADHD-related behaviors on average scored lower in reading (~0.30 SD) and math (~0.22 SD) than their undiagnosed peers – a difference two times larger than that between diagnosed and undiagnosed children with more severe ADHD-related behaviors. Pharmacological treatment did not attenuate most of this “diagnostic labeling effect” among children with less severe ADHD-related behaviors. Negative factors associated with an ADHD diagnosis may outweigh potential benefits for achievement among children with less severe ADHD-related behaviors, even those receiving treatment.