Emotional Understanding, Reactivity, and Regulation in Young Children with ADHD Symptoms.

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Abstract

The goal of the present study was to examine whether young children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms experience difficulties with emotional understanding, reactivity, and regulation. Participants were 64 children, 4 to 7 years of age (43 boys, 20 girls), 29 with ADHD symptoms and 34 typically developing children. Children completed an emotion matching task and parents reported on child lability and emotional regulation. Children also completed a frustrating computer task. Facial expressions of emotions were coded and children self-reported affect during the task. Parent reports indicated heightened lability and impaired emotional regulation abilities in children with ADHD symptoms. Compared to typically developing children, children with ADHD symptoms demonstrated emotional understanding impairments in matching similar expressions and matching expressions to situations, but not in producing expression labels or matching expression labels to images. Self-reports of negative affect during the frustration task indicated that children with ADHD symptoms experienced more difficulty with emotional regulation than typically developing children. Behavioral observations during the frustration task indicated that the two groups demonstrated a similar increase in expressed negative affect during frustration; however, children with ADHD symptoms showed higher levels of negative affect across all four conditions of the task. This study suggests that the deficits documented in older children with ADHD are already evident during the preschool years, and distinct from the developmentally appropriate emotional dysregulation seen in typically developing preschoolers.