Executive Functions and Attachment Relationships in Children with ADHD: Links to Externalizing/Internalizing Problems, Social Skills, and Negative Mood Regulation

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Abstract

Objective: Theoretical models suggest multiple underlying pathways for ADHD and multiple risk factors’ co-occurrence as impairing this population’s affective, interpersonal, and behavioral adjustment. After comparing groups’ executive functioning (EF) difficulties and attachment security with each parent, this study primarily aimed to examine four risk factors (ADHD, child-father attachment, child-mother attachment, EF) as possibly explaining children’s socioemotional/behavioral measures (externalizing/internalizing behavior, social skills, negative mood regulation).

Method: Participants were 100 children in Grades 5-6 (ages 11-12 years; M=11.45 years, SD=.50): 50 with formally diagnosed ADHD, and 50 with typical development (TD). Instruments were children’s self-report measures and teachers’ evaluation.

Results: Significant group differences emerged on all EF measures and attachment relationships, and most socioemotional/behavioral measures. Findings demonstrated the significant contribution of children’s ADHD, parental attachments, and, partially, EF difficulties in explaining children’s socioemotional/behavioral adjustment.

Conclusion: Children with ADHD, compared to children with TD, reported significantly larger EF deficits and a significantly higher incidence of insecure attachment to the father as well as a lower sense of trust and closeness to the mother. Outcomes highlighted the role of children’s four risk factors (ADHD, child-father attachment, child-mother attachment, EF) in explaining their socioemotional/behavioral adjustment. The EF deficits contributed only to intrapersonal maladjustment.