Developmental trajectories of aggression, prosocial behavior, and social-cognitive problem solving in emerging adolescents with clinically elevated attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms.


Abstract
Middle school is a critical yet understudied period of social behavioral risks and opportunities that may be particularly difficult for emerging adolescents with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) given their childhood social difficulties. Relatively few ADHD studies have examined social behavior and social-cognitive problem solving beyond the elementary years, or examined aspects of positive (prosocial) behavior. The current study examined how middle school students with clinically elevated ADHD symptoms differ from their non-ADHD peers on baseline (6th grade) and age-related changes in prosocial and aggressive behavior, and the extent to which social-cognitive problem solving strategies mediate these relations. Emerging adolescents with (n = 178) and without (n = 3,806) clinically elevated, teacher-reported ADHD-combined symptoms were compared longitudinally across 6th through 8th grades using parallel process latent growth curve modeling, accounting for student demographic characteristics, oppositional-defiant disorder (ODD) symptoms, deviant peer association, school climate, and parental monitoring. Sixth graders with elevated ADHD symptoms engaged in somewhat fewer prosocial behaviors (d = -0.44) and more aggressive behavior (d = 0.20) relative to their peers. These small social behavioral deficits decreased but were not normalized across the middle school years. Contrary to hypotheses, social-cognitive problem solving was not impaired in the ADHD group after accounting for co-occurring ODD symptoms and did not mediate the association between ADHD and social behavior during the middle school years. ADHD and social-cognitive problem solving contributed independently to social behavior, both in 6th grade and across the middle school years; the influence of social-cognitive problem solving on social behavior was highly similar for the ADHD and non-ADHD groups.