Emotion Regulation Difficulties in Boys with Oppositional Defiant Disorder/Conduct Disorder and the Relation with Comorbid Autism Traits and Attention Deficit Traits

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Abstract

Previous research has pointed towards a link between emotion dysregulation and aggressive behavior in children. Emotion regulation difficulties are not specific for children with persistent aggression problems, i.e. oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder (ODD/CD), children with other psychiatric conditions, such as autism spectrum disorders or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, have emotion regulation difficulties too. On a behavioral level some overlap exists between these disorders and comorbidity is high. The aim of this study was therefore twofold: 1) to examine emotion regulation difficulties in 65 boys with ODD/CD in comparison to a non-clinical control group (NC) of 38 boys (8–12 years) using a performance measure (Ultimatum Game), parent report and self-report, and 2) to establish to what extent emotion regulation in the ODD/CD group was correlated with severity of autism and/or attention deficit traits. Results on the Ultimatum Game showed that the ODD/CD group rejected more ambiguous offers than the NC group, which is seen as an indication of poor emotion regulation. Parents also reported that the ODD/CD group experienced more emotion regulation problems in daily life than the NC group. In contrast to these cognitive and behavioral measures, self-reports did not reveal any difference, indicating that boys with ODD/CD do not perceive themselves as having impairments in regulating their emotions. Emotional decision making within the ODD/CD group was not related to variation in autism or attention deficit traits. These results support the idea that emotion dysregulation is an important problem within ODD/CD, yet boys with ODD/CD have reduced awareness of this.