Social Problems in ADHD: Is it a Skills Acquisition or Performance Problem?

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Abstract

Recent models suggest that social skills training’s inefficacy for children with ADHD may be due to target misspecification, such that their social problems reflect inconsistent performance rather than knowledge/skill gaps. No study to date, however, has disentangled social skills acquisition from performance deficits in children with ADHD. Children ages 8–12 with ADHD (n = 47) and without ADHD (n = 23) were assessed using the well-validated social behavioral analysis framework to quantify cross-informant social skills acquisition deficits, performance deficits, and strengths. Results provided support for the construct and predictive validities of this Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) alternate scoring method, including expected magnitude and valence relations with BASC-2 social skills and ADHD symptoms based on both parent and teacher report. Acquisition deficits were relatively rare and idiosyncratic for both the ADHD and Non-ADHD groups, whereas children with ADHD demonstrated cross-informant social performance deficits (d = 0.82–0.99) on several specific behaviors involving attention to peer directives, emotion regulation, and social reciprocity. Relative to themselves, children with ADHD were perceived by parents and teachers as exhibiting more social strengths than social acquisition deficits; however, they demonstrated significantly fewer social strengths than the Non-ADHD group (d = −0.71 to −0.89). These findings are consistent with recent conceptualizations suggesting that social problems in ADHD primarily reflect inconsistent performance rather than a lack of social knowledge/skills. Implications for refining social skills interventions for ADHD are discussed.