

Associations between abuse/neglect and ADHD from childhood to young adulthood: A prospective nationally-representative twin study

Stern A, Agnew-Blais J, Danese A, Fisher HL, Jaffee SR, Matthews T, Polanczyk GV, Arseneault L.

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Abstract

Child maltreatment has consistently been found to be associated with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). However, the robustness of this association and the direction of the link between maltreatment and ADHD remain unclear. We used data from the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, a cohort of 2232 British twins, to investigate the associations between exposure to abuse/neglect and ADHD in childhood and in young adulthood, and to test their robustness and specificity. We also aimed to test longitudinal associations between abuse/neglect and ADHD from childhood to young adulthood, controlling for confounders. Results indicated strong associations between abuse/neglect and ADHD in childhood and also in young adulthood. In childhood, the association was concentrated among children with comorbid conduct disorder. Longitudinal analyses showed that childhood ADHD predicted abuse/neglect in later years. This association was again concentrated among individuals with comorbid conduct disorder. Abuse/neglect in childhood was not associated with later ADHD in young adulthood after adjusting for childhood ADHD. Our study does not provide support of a causal link between child abuse/neglect and adult ADHD but highlights the possibility of a long-term effect of disruptive behaviors on the risk for experiencing abuse/neglect. These findings emphasize the need for clinicians treating people with ADHD, especially those with comorbid conduct disorder, to be aware of their increased risk for experiencing abuse/neglect. Interventions aimed at reducing risks of abuse/neglect should also focus on the environment of individuals with disruptive behaviors.