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A psychometric evaluation of the social skills rating system in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

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Abstract

The social skills rating system (SSRS) was developed to assess social skills of children, as observed by multiple raters (teacher, parent, child). Studies of the SSRS have been conducted with handicapped, mentally retarded and learning disabled children. No studies have reported the psychometric properties of the SSRS in a clinical ADHD sample. This is important, because deficient social functioning is associated with ADHD. The present study assesses the psychometric properties of the teacher, parent and child versions of the SSRS in children with ADHD ($n = 123$), and normal controls ($n = 239$). Also, the social skills of children with ADHD, as rated on the SSRS were examined. Results support the factor structure and internal consistency of the original SSRS-teacher version. Moreover, support was found for 3 out of 4 scales of the SSRS-parent version. The factor structure of the SSRS-child version could not be replicated. An explanatory factor analysis on the SSRS-child version yielded two factors. Evidence was found for discriminative ability of the SSRS between normal controls and children with ADHD. Finally, informant agreement between raters was found to be poor.

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1. Introduction

Social skills such as cooperation with peers, initiating relationships, sharing and receiving compliments enable a child to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable responses (Gresham, 1988). Unfortunately not all children develop adequate social skills in their childhood (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Especially, children with ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) are at risk for experiencing difficulties in their social functioning compared to normal controls (e.g. Gentschel & MacLaughlin, 2000; Greene et al., 1996; Biederman, Faraone, & Chen, 1993). Social impairment was found to be a significant predictor of an adverse long-term outcome of ADHD in adolescence (Greene, Biederman, Faraone, Sienna, & Garcia-Jetton, 1997; Greene et al., 1999). Therefore, identifying children with ADHD and social disabilities at an early stage is important for preventive purposes (Greene et al., 1997).

Several instruments have been developed to help identify social problems in children. The social skills rating system (SSRS), developed by Gresham and Elliot (1990), is a multi-rater instrument with a child, parent and teacher version, for the assessment of social skills dimensions in children. The SSRS has been used in several studies as a screening device (e.g. Frankel & Feinberg, 2002; Gresham, MacMillan, Bocian, Ward, & Forness, 1998) and as a measure to assess treatment outcome (e.g., Antshel & Remer, 2003; Piffner & McBurnett, 1997; Sheridan, Dee, Morgan, McCormick, & Walker, 1996). Children's social behavior has been found to vary across different settings (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Kazdin, 1979). The SSRS takes this situational specificity into account and assumes that parents, children and teachers often contribute unique information to ascertain social behaviors (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

Consequently, Gresham and Elliot (1990) analyzed the parent, teacher and child versions of the SSRS separately, resulting in different factor structures for each version. These factor analyses showed that all three versions contained three factors: "Cooperation", "Assertion" and "Self-control". The parent version consisted of an additional factor, "Responsibility". The child version contained an additional factor, labeled "Empathy". The internal consistency of the SSRS subscales ranged from .51 to .91, with a mean internal consistency of .75 (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

A number of recent studies have examined the psychometric qualities of the SSRS in further detail (Albertus, Birkinbine, Lyon, & Naibi, 1996; Bramlett, Smith, & Edmonds, 1994; Flanagan, Alfonso, Primavera, Povall, & Higgins, 1996; Gresham, Elliot, & Black, 1987; Merrell & Poppinga, 1994; Shahim, 1999). Shahim (1999), for example, using a sample of 89 special education students, found a moderate correlation ($r = .30$) between the teacher and parent ratings of social skills on the SSRS. Bramlett et al. (1994) found a moderate relationship ($r = .46$) between teacher and parent ratings of a mixed group of learning disabled, mentally retarded and non-referred children. These studies suggest that social skills are perceived as somewhat consistent across raters.

Other studies examining convergent validity have found moderate to high correlations between the SSRS and other social competence measures, including the Woodcock–Johnson Scales of Independent Behavior (Merrell & Poppinga, 1994), the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (Albertus et al., 1996) and the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC; Flanagan et al., 1996). Flanagan et al. (1996) found a high positive correlation ($r = .58$) between parent ratings on the BASC and the SSRS. However, teacher ratings showed a low correlation between the BASC and the SSRS ($r = .23$).

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