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Psychopathological manifestations of children with intellectual disabilities according to their cognitive and adaptive behavior profile

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ABSTRACT

Children with intellectual disabilities show deficits in cognitive abilities and adaptive behavior which increase the risk of psychopathological disorders. This exploratory study aims at delineating profiles of children based on their cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviors, and to compare them on psychopathological manifestations. A cognitive assessment and an evaluation of adaptive behaviors are conducted with 52 school-age children receiving services from a rehabilitation center for people with intellectual disabilities. Adaptive behaviors are evaluated by a special educator and a questionnaire concerning psychopathology is filled out by a parent and a teacher. Cluster analyses highlight three profiles among children: Performing, Uncooperative and Non-performing. They differ on cognitive functions, collaboration and in terms of practical abilities of adaptive behaviors. Chi-square tests show significant differences in social competences, but not in problematic behaviors, according to the viewpoint of parents and teachers. Potential explanations are provided to understand the absence of significant differences in problematic behaviors between the three profiles.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, researchers have focused on evaluating psychopathological disorders and their prevalence in various samples of children and adolescents presenting disabilities (Dykens, 2000). In the field of intellectual disability, psychopathology refers to two distinct clinical issues, psychiatric disorders and problematic behaviors (Rojahn & Tassé, 1996). Authors generally agree on the fact that children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to present a psychopathology than those of the general population (Kolaitis, 2008; Tonge, 2007). However, the causes that may explain this greater vulnerability have received far less attention in research, particularly concerning children (Chadwick, Piroth, Walker, Bernard, & Taylor, 2000; Dykens, 2000).

Several hypotheses have been developed to explain the greater prevalence of psychopathological disorders in children with intellectual disabilities. In particular, they point to biopsychosocial and developmental factors such as personality styles, social stigmatization, genetic etiology and neurological deficits (Dykens, 2000).

Cognitive disorders and the level of adaptive functioning may also explain some problematic behaviors of children with intellectual disabilities (Baumeister, Kupstas, & Woodlet-Zanthos, 1991). The combination of those two factors in studying psychopathology is mandatory since they provide the basis for the definition of intellectual disability. This definition refers to an intellectual deficit which is related to cognitive functions as well as to a deficit in adaptive behaviors (Luckasson et al., 2002). Despite the fact that the identification of intellectual disabilities have evolved over the last 50 years, the three fundamental criteria of the definition and its operationalization remain substantially the same (Schalock et al., 2007). Moreover, the consideration of adaptive behaviors in the construct of intellectual disability is a key component of a social–ecological framework (Schalock et al., 2007) in which the human functioning depends on the interaction between individuals and their environments (Wehmeyer et al., 2008). Since adaptive behaviors are increasingly meaningful to determine support needs, the diagnosis of intellectual disability must no longer be based only on the IQ score (Garaigordobil & Pérez, 2007). According to Schalock (2006), the merge of these two components of intellectual disability can extend the understanding of a personal competence model of functioning.

Adaptive behaviors reflect, among other things, the cognitive and social development of a child (Tassé & Morin, 2003). In fact, the expression of appropriate social behaviors is strongly associated with cognitive functions (Schneider, Lockl, & Fernandez, 2005). Furthermore, a greater deficit in cognitive functions is related to a greater dependency of an individual on his environment (Skoff, 1988). Goodman (1993) identified the main factors that possibly link cognitive deficits and psychopathology. These hypotheses suggest that psychopathology may be caused by cognitive deficits or that a common cause, such as nervous system damage, may contribute both to cognitive deficits and psychopathology. However, Goodman's hypotheses have never been the object of in-depth investigations. Moreover, there are few studies in this field that specifically concern children with intellectual disabilities (Chadwick et al., 2000). Although it is rarely used among them, a neuropsychological evaluation allows the collection of data concerning cognitive functions and the investigation of relationships between cerebral structures and behavioral manifestations. Regarding the evaluation of psychopathology in children with intellectual disabilities, de Ruiter, Dekker, Douma, Verhulst, and Koot (2008) recommend the collection of data among various respondents since they all experience their functioning in various contexts. This approach also allows a more complete description of the behavioral functioning of children which, in fact, is rarely carried out. Moreover, since parents and teachers are the main individuals providing care to a child, they are best suited to complete his assessment (Shaw, Hammer, & Leland, 1991).

According to Emerson and Hatton (2007), further studies should contribute to a better understanding of the contribution and the interaction of intellectual, social or environmental, psychological, and biological factors to explain psychiatric disorders among persons with intellectual disabilities. The present exploratory study follows two objectives. The first one is to delineate profiles based on children's results of a cognitive and an adaptive behavior evaluation. The second objective aims at comparing these profiles on their psychopathological manifestations, according to the views expressed by parents and teachers.

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