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# Emotional development and adaptive abilities in adults with intellectual disability. A correlation study between the Scheme of Appraisal of Emotional Development (SAED) and Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale (VABS)

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### ABSTRACT

The importance of emotional aspects in developing cognitive and social abilities has already been underlined by many authors even if there is no unanimous agreement on the factors constituting adaptive abilities, nor is there any on the way to measure them or on the relation between adaptive ability and cognitive level. The purposes of this study was to test the psychometric characteristics of a specific tool for the assessment of the emotional development and correlating such test with the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale, one of the most widely used tools to assess adaptive abilities in order to verify possible correlations between emotional development and adaptive abilities.

Thirty-three adults living in residential centres for people with Intellectual Disability without psychiatric/behavioral disorders of clinical significance, were evaluated by administering the Scheme of Appraisal of Emotional Development (SAED) and the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale (VABS) and a statistical analysis was conducted to verify possible correlations. The SAED proved to be a reliable psychometric tool and a strong positive correlation has

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indeed emerged between VABS' and SAED's general scores, therefore as the emotional development age increases so does at the same time adaptive age. The need to complete the assessment of adaptive abilities with that of emotional development seems therefore confirmed. Such tools provide the opportunity to gather extremely important information on the emotional needs of particular person regardless of the presence or absence of Intellectual Disability.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of emotion in developing cognitive and social abilities had been emphasized by [Vygotskij \(1973\)](#). Additionally, attachment theory stresses that in every age and culture, affectivity, cognitivism and behaviors are closely correlated to the normal development of infants ([Waters & Cummings, 2000](#)).

Affective states seem to have a particular influence on attentive processes, reconfirming that the interaction between emotion and cognition in developing social competence is highly significant ([Keenan, 2002](#)). The interaction between emotion and acquisition of social competence starts in early infancy through the mother/infant relationship ([Kirsh, Crnic, & Greenberg, 1995](#)), but is later influenced by the relation between child and teacher ([Ellis, 2000](#)).

During adolescence, the relation between affectivity and cognitivism continues, although the number of studies on this topic is limited ([Rosso, Young, Femia, & Yurgelun-Todd, 2004](#)). At this stage of life, activation patterns in the prefrontal cortex mediate cognitive control in emotional situations. Various neurobehavioral changes connected with puberal development also have important consequences not only on motivation and emotion but also on acquisition of social competence ([Dahl, 2004](#); [Lewis & Stieben, 2004](#)). These factors also hold for the development of children and adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities.

Currently, Intellectual Disability is defined as significant limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior with onset before age 18 years of age ([AAMR, 2002](#)). The diagnostic criteria point out the importance of adaptive abilities, yet, this concept is extremely broad and includes three different domains (conceptual, social, practical) that, in their turn, comprise several abilities. To date, there is no unanimous agreement on the factors constituting adaptive abilities, nor is there any one best way to measure them or on the relation between adaptive ability and intelligence; therefore, although their importance is self-evident in defining and diagnosing Intellectual Disability, "adaptive abilities" remain an "open question" ([Schalock, 1999](#)). Different authors from a Developmental Perspective ([Cicchetti & Ganiban, 1990](#); [Izard & Harris, 1995](#); [Kasari & Bauminger, 1998](#)) argue that other aspects, among which emotional development, play an important role in adaptive abilities and behavior. Unfortunately until recently the issue of emotional development in persons with Intellectual Disability has received little attention from professionals. According to different investigations ([Dosen, 2005a](#); [Greenspan & Wieder, 1998](#); [Whitman, O'Callaghan, & Sommer, 1997](#)) persons with Intellectual Disability are not only cognitively, but also emotionally different from typically developing children. Additionally, there are meanings that emotional development in persons with Intellectual Disability is often more affected than intellectual development.

At each level of emotional development, different emotional needs and motivations, different coping abilities and different abilities to adapt to the environment, and consequently different behavioral patterns can be found. Apparently, the aspect of emotional development is an important factor which should be counted in the measurement of adaptive behavior. The level of emotional development is an important factor in onset and presentation of maladaptive behavior as well as in onset and presentation of psychopathology ([Dosen, 2005a,b](#)). This factor is important for understanding psychopathology in its chronological development, from very early infancy to adulthood.

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