

Reliability of the Child Behavior Checklist for the assessment of behavioral problems of children and youth with mild mental retardation☆

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Abstract

The assessment of psychopathology in persons with mental retardation requires reliable and valid instruments. In the present study, the reliability of the Child Behavior Checklist was determined, using data of 42 children and youth with mild mental retardation, with ages from 10 to 18 years. Kappa coefficients and intra-class correlations were computed to determine the reliability at item level and syndrome level. At item level, mean kappa's for inter-rater and test-retest reliability were 0.267 and 0.52, respectively. At syndrome level, mean intra-class correlations for inter-rater and test-retest reliability were 0.493 and 0.775, respectively. These results suggest that the Child Behavior Checklist may not always represent a reliable checklist for the assessment of psychopathology among children and youth with mild mental retardation. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Researchers in mental retardation traditionally emphasize cognitive functioning, often ignoring psychopathology (Glick & Zigler, 1995; Zigler & Burack,

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1989). This approach may be due to difficulties in distinguishing between symptoms of mental retardation and psychopathology, a phenomenon that is known as diagnostic overshadowing (Reiss & Szyszko, 1983). However, persons with mental retardation may also suffer from a wide range of psychopathological disorders.

Researchers have shown that persons with mild mental retardation more often have psychopathological disorders (Baker & Cantwell, 1987; Borthwick-Duffy & Eymann, 1990), and are at a higher risk to develop behavioral and emotional disorders than nonhandicapped persons (Leahy et al., 1982; Matson & Barrett, 1982; Menolascino & Swanson, 1982; Reid, 1980). Also, persons with mild mental retardation more often display aggressive and antisocial behavior and conduct disorders (Charlot et al., 1993; Glick & Zigler, 1995; Reiss & Rojahn, 1993); they commit crimes significantly more often and are more often sent to prison (Lang & Kahn, 1986).

The assessment of psychopathology in persons with mild mental retardation requires reliable and valid instruments. One of the best-studied instruments for assessing behavior problems is the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL has been designed to record behavioral problems and competencies of nonhandicapped children from age 4 to 18, as reported by their parents or parent-surrogates. A large number of studies has focused on the reliability and validity of the CBCL in classifying psychopathological and social competencies in both clinical and nonclinical populations (e.g., Biederman et al., 1993; Edelbrock & Costello, 1988). Achenbach (1991) assessed test-retest reliability of the CBCL item scores using intra-class correlation (ICC). The ICC was 0.952 for the 118 problem items. Mean Pearson r 's for problem scales was 0.89. Interparent correlations between problem scales ranged from 0.48 to 0.80. Verhulst et al. (1996) assessed test-retest reliability of the Dutch version of the CBCL. Overall r 's for problem scales was 0.84. On the problem scales, mean r 's found for interparent agreement ranged from 0.65 to 0.81.

Although the CBCL has not been designed to assess psychopathology in persons with mental retardation, it is frequently employed for this target group. Larson and Lapointe (1980) and Matson et al. (1988) studied children who had been classified as educable mentally retarded and had behavioral disorders, emotional disorders, and social problems. Margalit et al. (1989) studied children and youth with moderate mental retardation and behavioral disorders. Thompson et al. (1990) and Margalit and Ankonina (1991) assessed behavioral disorders among children with learning disabilities, mental retardation, borderline intellectual functioning, and emotional and behavioral disorders. Dykens et al. (1992) and Hodapp et al. (1997) used the CBCL to assess adaptive and maladaptive behavioral disorders among persons with Prader-Willi syndrome. Each of these studies took reliability of the CBCL for granted. Probably such a generalization across different populations is unjustified. The purpose of the present study was to determine the inter-rater and test-retest reliability of the CBCL with children and youth with mild mental retardation.

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