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## Persistence of early emerging aberrant behavior in children with developmental disabilities

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### Abstract

This study examined the persistence of early emerging aberrant behavior in 13 preschool children with developmental disabilities. The severity of aberrant behavior was assessed every 6 months over a 3-year period. Teachers completed the assessments using the Aberrant Behavior Checklist [Aman, M. G., & Singh, N. N. (1986). *Aberrant Behavior Checklist: Manual*. East Aurora, NY: Slosson Educational Publications; (1994). *Aberrant Behavior Checklist—Community*. East Aurora, NY: Slosson Educational Publications]. Problem behaviors were present in all children at the beginning of the study. Nine of the 13 children entered the study with relatively high levels of aberrant behaviors that showed little change over the 3 years. These data suggest that aberrant behaviors often emerge early and can be highly persistent during the preschool years. Prevention would, therefore, seem to require home-based interventions that begin before 4 years of age.

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## 1. Introduction

Aberrant behaviors, such as aggression, self-injury, property destruction, stereotyped movements, and extreme tantrums are highly prevalent in individuals with developmental disabilities (Emerson et al., 2001a). Given this high prevalence, it is not surprising that the treatment of aberrant behaviors is a major priority in developmental disability services. Advances in functional assessment methodology have lead to a range of new and improved interventions for the treatment of aberrant behaviors in individuals with developmental disabilities (Hastings & Brown, 2000). Relatively less research has focused on the prevention of aberrant behavior in young children with developmental disabilities (Sigafoos, Arthur, & O'Reilly, 2003). It is possible that a better understanding of the early development and longitudinal course of aberrant behaviors in young children with developmental disabilities may lead to improved prevention efforts.

Along these lines, several studies have investigated the persistence of aberrant behaviors in individuals with developmental disabilities. Emerson et al. (2001b), for example, found that self-injurious behaviors were highly persistent over a 7-year period in a sample of 95 individuals receiving mental retardation services in the United Kingdom. Jones (1999) found that the stereotyped movements initially observed in eight adults with developmental disabilities were still evident 10 years later. In a more comprehensive study, Einfeld and his colleagues (Einfeld & Tonge, 1996; Einfeld, Tonge, & Rees, 2001; Einfeld, Tonge, Turner, Parmenter, & Smith, 1999; Tonge & Einfeld, 1991) tracked a sample of Australian children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities for 5 years to ascertain the prevalence of behavioral and emotional problems. They found that behavioral and emotional problems were highly prevalent (30%) and highly persistent in this sample, especially for individuals with certain types of disability syndromes. For example, behavioral and emotional problems were more common in individuals with Prader-Willi and Williams syndrome, when compared to individuals with Down syndrome (Einfeld et al., 1999).

However, these previous studies have tended to focus on specific forms of aberrant behaviors (e.g., self-injury, stereotyped movements) and/or on older individuals. For example, the average age of the various syndrome groups in the Einfeld et al. (1999) study ranged from 9.5 to 17.2 years. It is therefore difficult to know if similar trends would be found in younger children. Longitudinal studies of younger children would, seem necessary to extend the current knowledge base. In addition to extending the current knowledge base to younger children, longitudinal assessments of aberrant behavior in young children with developmental disabilities may provide much needed data on the persistence of early emerging aberrant behaviors.

Berkson and colleagues (Berkson, 2002; Berkson, Tupa, & Sherman, 2001) studied infants and toddlers with severe disabilities for signs of emerging stereotyped and self-injurious behaviors. Their results suggest that these forms of aberrant behavior may emerge with the toddlers' advancing motor skills and persist beyond 3 years of age. Murphy, Hall, Oliver, and Kissi-Debra (1999) noted, that "Very little is known about the early stages of self-injurious behavior (SIB) in young children with developmental disabilities . . ." (p. 149). They did, however, show that teachers might be able to identify early forms of self-injury in school-aged children with severe mental retardation and/or autism.

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