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Research in Developmental Disabilities



Screening for pragmatic language impairment: The potential of the children's communication checklist

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2009

Accepted 21 January 2009

Keywords:

Pragmatic language impairment

Specific language impairment

Screening

CCC

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the validity of the Dutch Children's Communication Checklist (CCC) for children in kindergarten in a community sample, in order to assess the feasibility of using it as a screening instrument in the general population. Teachers completed the CCC for a representative sample of 1396 children at kindergarten level, taken from 53 primary schools in The Netherlands. The CCC was also completed for a clinical group consisting of children with SLI in special education. Reliability as measured with internal consistency scores was found to be good for the community sample. With regard to the construct validity, a five-factor second-order factor model was found when the pragmatic subscales were analysed, which provided a reasonable fit. Criterion validity as measured using the concordance between the CCC and teacher opinions was moderate. The children identified by the CCC as having Pragmatic Language Impairment (defined as scoring below the cut off of 132) were often characterized by the teachers as having social-emotional problems, language problems or combined problems. Comparison with a clinical SLI sample showed the pragmatically impaired children in the community sample to have a profile similar to that of the clinical group of children with PLI in special education. The main difference was visible in structural language problems, which were less severe for the PLI group in mainstream education. The results of this study suggest that screening for PLI is indeed possible using the CCC.

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1. Introduction

Several studies have attempted to describe the pragmatic language problems found in some children (Cohen et al., 1998; Geurts et al., 2004; Laws & Bishop, 2004). These pragmatic problems can consist of an inability to adhere to the needs of the conversational partner, insufficient discourse management skills, or problems conveying and understanding intentions (Landa, 2005). The aforementioned studies have all studied pragmatic language problems in the context of a developmental disorder such as autism or Specific Language Impairment (SLI). However, pragmatic language problems are not necessarily unique to these disorders (Bishop & Norbury, 2002). Though pragmatic language problems are suspected to occur in the general population, information on the prevalence is in short supply. This lack of information stems mostly from detection issues. Whereas the detection of language form problems is relatively straightforward, pragmatic language problems are more difficult to detect, because language pragmatism is dependent on specific context and implicit rules. Given that the parents and teachers of children tend to know the children quite well and can therefore take a variety of contexts into account, parent and teacher questionnaires are a simple and cost-effective means to screen for severe pragmatic language problems, the condition known as Pragmatic Language Impairment (PLI) (Adams & Lloyd, 2005). One such instrument is the Children's Communication Checklist (CCC), which was developed to assess those aspects of communication which are typically not detected during a standard language assessment (Bishop, 1998). The present study investigates the viability of using the CCC as a screening instrument in the community sample. Screening in this sense means identifying children whose pragmatic competence is such that referral to a speech and language specialist is indicated, though it can be used only as a first indication for specialist treatment (Pickstone, Hannon, & Fox, 2002). As a side effect, the study sheds more light on the actual prevalence of pragmatic language problems in the general population. Given that language problems can greatly affect the psychosocial and cognitive development of children, it is valuable to assess this prevalence and to determine the CCC's psychometric properties when used as a screening instrument at an age group where screening can potentially prevent further escalation of problems.

The CCC was designed to identify pragmatic language problems in children with SLI. It can be completed by either teachers or parents. It consists of 70 questions, to be answered with *definitely applies*, *applies somewhat* or *does not apply*. The questions were formulated and divided into subscales based on clinical judgements of professionals. After initial subscales were formed, internal consistency measures were used to further delineate the subscales. The final CCC consists of the nine subscales presented in Table 1. Five of these subscales pertain to pragmatic language skills (Inappropriate Initiations, Coherence, Stereotyped Conversation, Use of Context and Rapport) and are summed to form an overall Pragmatic Composite. The four remaining subscales (Speech and Syntax, Social and Interests) are meant to allow for a superficial differentiation between pragmatic problems caused by a possible autistic disorder or a possible language disorder. As such these subscales might be related to the pragmatic subscales for some children, but not for others.

Table 1

CCC Subscales with number of items, score range and content.

CCC scale	Number of items	Range	Content
A – Speech	11	16–38	Phonological and speech abilities
B – Syntax	4	24–32	Grammatical abilities
C – Inappropriate initiations	6	18–30	Aspects of turn taking
D – Coherence	8	20–36	Use of coherence
E – Stereotyped conversation	8	14–30	Versatility of conversational topics and use of different words
F – Use of context	8	16–32	Understanding of social rules pertaining to different situations and use of language in context
G – Rapport	8	18–34	Use of gestures and facial expressions
H – Social	10	14–34	Social behaviour which can be related to an autistic disorder
I – Interests	7	20–34	Specific interests which can be related to an autistic disorder
Pragmatic composite (sum of subscales C–G)	38	88–162	–

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