

The effects of ADHD on children's academic achievement and behaviour

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Extended summary

The Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is, according to many researchers, the most common and frequent disorder of childhood (Brunstetter, 1985). Many specialists, who study this syndrome, are very often interested in the secondary symptoms that accompany the presence of ADHD and its comorbidity with other disorders like Conduct Disorder and Specific Learning Disabilities. Delay in speech development and other language disorders are also related to the presence of S.L.D. The question that is frequently raised in case of comorbidity of ADHD and S.L.D. is which of the two disorders constitutes the primary problem. Another issue that has been of continuing interest is the importance of each one of the basic categories of the syndrome - attention deficit and hyperactivity - in relation to the secondary symptoms that we have already described. Presently, a child can be diagnosed as having ADHD, Combined Type, ADHD, Predominately Hyperactive-Impulsive Type, or ADHD, Predominately Inattentive Type. In ADHD children's case, it is suggested that their main difficulty concerns sustained attention.

We set two aims at the present research. First, we aimed to study the impact of ADHD on the academic achievement and behaviour of children of the first class of primary school, as reported by their teachers. Second, given our belief that in case of children with S.L.D., very often ADHD is the primary problem, we focused on studying the three subtypes of ADHD separately, in order to understand which one influences more the sections mentioned earlier.

Our research was school-based and took place in May 1997 at the total of the six schools of a small provincial town of Peloponnesos, with a population of about 15.000 inhabitants. We asked all the teachers of the first class of these six schools to fill in two coded questionnaires with closed questions for each one of their pupils (N=290). The first questionnaire consisted of questions relevant to children's adjustment to school, their academic achievement, their behaviour, their self-esteem level and the quality of their relationships with their schoolmates. The second questionnaire was composed of DSM's-IV criteria about ADHD. We studied separately data concerning the three different subtypes of ADHD.

We have collected data for 290 pupils, 52,4% of which were boys and 47,6% girls. Our results indicated that, according to their teachers, 10% of the pupils were found to meet the criteria for ADHD Combined Type.

Our findings are generally consistent with the literature in relation to the negative effects of ADHD on children's academic achievement and behaviour (Barkley, 1997). Children who meet the DSM's-IV criteria for ADHD, as estimated by their teachers, appear to face important difficulties in their adjustment to school and in learning how to read and write, in comparison to their peers. Their poor educational performance influence negatively their self-esteem level and this negative impact complicates these children's effort to cope with the demands of school. Failure at school leads very often these children to disappointment and, as a result, they become less motivated about school learning. Sometimes, a child who doesn't manage to cope with the demands of his or her environment, tries to attract attention by demonstrating disruptive behaviour which obviously doesn't facilitate at all either the establishment of favourable relationships or his or her adjustment to school

According to our results, the subtype which influences in particular academic achievement and, consequently, self-esteem level of ADHD children is ADHD, Predominately Inattentive Type. With regard to behaviour, this study revealed that a child's difficulties to behave in an adequate way according to the circumstances, are more important in cases of ADHD, Combined Type.

Braswell & Bloomquist (1991) report that any given treatment should be viewed as only one component in a multimodal approach. Multimodal interventions have been found to be the most effective as far as ADHD is concerned. Our own suggestion is a multi-level approach which includes not only the child but his parents and educators as well. This approach implies that our first aim is to improve child's self-esteem and to increase his or her motivation about learning.

The techniques we use are based on the principals of behavioural theory. Our aim is to control child's behaviour and to improve his or her ability for sustained attention. In parallel with these, we teach the child strategies of auto-regulation in order to make him or her able to handle and control his or her own difficulties.

This way, the child practises in sustaining attention and, as a result, he or she learns easier and obtains positive experiences concerning learning. Consequently, his or her performance gets better and this improvement has a positive impact on his or her self-image. The child who has now got a better performance and a higher self-esteem becomes more

motivated about learning. In addition, the child doesn't experience the need to be provocative in order to attract attention because he or she learns how to attract attention to positive types of behaviour. Positive behaviour leads to improved interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the basic characteristics of a multi-level approach may be summarised as follows:

- The specialist intervenes in variable sections, like the cognitive level, the psychological level and, especially, the behavioural level in order to modify it. Furthermore, he uses multiple techniques based on cognitive-behavioural framework.
- People who are responsible for the child's education, like parents and teachers, participate closely into the therapeutical process.
- This approach is success-oriented.
- This approach presents positive results in various sections.

Summary

We set two aims in the present study. First, we aimed to explore the impact of ADHD on the academic achievement and behaviour of children attending primary school, as reported by their teachers. Second, we investigated the independent influence of the three subtypes of ADHD on the child's functioning. Our research took place at the total of the six schools of a small provincial town of Peloponnese. We asked all the teachers of the first grade to fill in two coded questionnaires for each one of their pupils (N=290). The first questionnaire consisted of questions relevant to the children's adjustment to school, their academic achievement, their behaviour, their self-esteem level and the quality of their relationships with their schoolmates. The second questionnaire was composed of DSM's-IV criteria for ADHD. We analysed separately data concerning the three different subtypes of ADHD. Our results indicated that, according to their teachers, 10% of the pupils were found to meet the criteria for ADHD, Combined Type. These children appeared to face important difficulties in their adjustment to school in comparison to their peers. According to our results, the subtype which seemed to influence in particular academic achievement was ADHD, Predominately Inattentive Type. Given the negative impact of ADHD on several domains of the child's functioning, we suggest that intervention should be multi-level. Such an approach focuses on the improvement of the child's self-esteem and the increase of his / her motivation about

learning. The techniques used should lead to the improvement of the child's ability for sustained attention and auto-regulation.