



The use of the Pre-School Behavior Checklist (PBCL) as a screening instrument for problematic behaviors in preschoolers

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Introduction

- ◆ The prevalence of **Emotional-Behavioral Disorders (EBD)** in preschool children is estimated around **10-15%** (Campbell, 1995).
- ◆ Longitudinal studies have documented impressive **continuities** for some behavioral problems like ADHD, Conduct Disorder and others **from childhood to adulthood** (Mannuzza et al., 1991).
- ◆ Some patterns of symptoms, like **speech or attention problems**, may be **early precursors** of the later appearance of **learning difficulties**. In addition, within the framework of an epigenetic approach to development, secondary difficulties such as low self-esteem or impaired social adjustment can also be developed. (Maniadaki et al., 2006).
- ◆ Therefore, the interest of many specialists is focused on the **early identification of EBD**, aiming to the implementation of early treatment and the **prevention of secondary difficulties** (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2002).
- ◆ Research has shown that, nowadays, EBD can be reliably identified at preschool age (Kakourou et al., 2005; Kakourou & Maniadaki, 2000; Timothy et al., 2002) if the **appropriate screening instruments** are in use and the preschool educators have relevant awareness.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was twofold:

- to try the use of the Pre-School Behavior Checklist (PBCL; McGuire & Richman, 1988) as a potential screening instrument for the early identification of children in need for further intervention,
- to investigate whether educators' beliefs about their pupils' problematic behavior might be influenced by the child's sex.

Method

A. Sample

314 preschool children (152 boys and 161 girls), (mean age= 55.63 months, sd =10.81)

B. Measures

- The PBCL is designed to help educators to identify children aged 2-5, experiencing emotional and behavioral problems, by providing descriptions of a variety of behaviors and by asking the respondent whether he/she thinks that these behaviors characterize his/her pupils. The 22 items are related to emotional difficulties, conduct problems, temper tantrums, activity level, social relations, habits, speech and language, wetting and soiling. The total score can be compared to the prescribed cutoff score to indicate if a behavioral/emotional problem may exist. Individual item scores provide information about specific areas of difficulty.
- The PBCL has been found to have good psychometric properties (McGuire & Richman, 1988).
- Compared to other relevant screening instruments, the PBCL is smaller, quicker to complete and focused on the preschool age.

C. Procedure

Educators completed the translated Greek version of the PBCL for each child in kindergartens in Athens.

Results

Table 1. Frequencies of the PBCL problems

Problems	Percentage %
Activity level	14
Interferes	9.9
Poor concentration	8.6
Unclear speech	7.8
Difficult to manage	7.3
Whines	6.7
Wanders	6.7
Not liked by peers	5.4
Teases	5.4
Fights	5.1
Demands attention	4.8
Withdrawn from peers	4.5
Sensitive	4.5
Total reluctance to speak	4.2
Withdrawn from staff	3.2
Miserable	2.9
Habits	1.6
Wets	1.3
Soils	1
Destructive	1
Temper tantrums	0.6
Fearful	0.3

◆ The most frequent problems the preschoolers were found to face are high activity level and poor concentration. These behaviors could be early precursors of hyperactivity and attention deficit, which are the main symptoms of ADHD (Dopfner et al, 2004) (Table 1).

Table 2. The relationship between educators' concern and the existence of problematic behavior

		Problematic behavior (%)		
		No	Yes	Total
Educators' concern (%)	No	91.9	8.1	100
	Probably	57.1	42.9	100
	Yes	13.6	86.4	100
	Total	80.3	19.7	100

◆ As we can see in Table 2, educators seemed concerned about a significant number of children who were found to display problematic behavior indeed, according to the PBCL. It seems, therefore, that nursery teachers have the potential of being a reliable source for the identification of EBD during preschool years.

Table 3. The relationship between educators' concern and the child's sex

		The child's sex (%)		
		Boy	Girl	Total
Educators' concern (%)	No	43.0	57.0	100
	Probably	62.5	37.5	100
	Yes	72.7	27.3	100
	Total	48.6	51.4	100

◆ As shown in Table 3, educators are concerned about a larger number of boys (72.7%) than girls (27.3%).

Table 4. The relationship between problematic behavior and the child's sex

	The child's sex (%)			
	Boy	Girl	Total	
Problematic behavior (%)	No	44.6	55.4	100
	Yes	64.5	35.5	100
	Total	48.6	51.4	100

◆ It is noticeable that educators are concerned about a larger number of boys (72.7%) than the actual number of those who might really face behavioral problems (64.5%), while regarding to the number of girls that the educators are concerned about (27.3%), those who really face behavioral problems (35.5%) surpass the teachers' estimations (Tables 3, 4).

Discussion

- ◆ The findings of the present study are in accordance with other studies regarding both the prevalence of emotional-behavioral problems in preschoolers and the **higher prevalence of such problems in boys compared to girls** (Achenbach et al., 1991; Maniadaki et al., 2005).
- ◆ Moreover, it seems that educators' concern about a number of children, greatly coincides about the identification of problematic behaviour displayed by them.
- ◆ Thus, the **PBCL** seems to have the potential to serve as a **useful screening instrument of EBD at the preschool age** and preschool educators could benefit a lot from their education in the use of such instruments which could help them to verify and concretize their concern about several of their pupils.
- ◆ Finally, consistent to other research (Maniadaki et al., 2006), the results suggest that **educators might be biased** regarding their concern about some of their pupils, **overestimating the boys' problems and underestimating the girls'**. Therefore, the use of a reliable standardized instrument like the PBCL could prevent them from over-referring boys and under-referring girls to Child Mental Health Services.
- ◆ However, **the use of such instruments** is only a preliminary stage at the assessment of children's problematic behavior and **does not substitute the clinical assessment** which should follow.
- ◆ **Future research** should investigate the predictive and concurrent validity of the PBCL in Greece and move to the **standardization of the instrument in the Greek population**.

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