Findings from the Growing Up in Scotland Study

Study Aims

This study investigated whether young children may develop emotional problems at different ages, for different reasons.

The study used information from around 2,900 families in the Growing Up in Scotland first birth cohort to explore different patterns of children’s emotional problems, from age 4 to age 8. These children were born in 2004 or 2005.

Which emotional problems were investigated?

The study examined symptoms of depression, anxiety, withdrawal and loneliness.

High levels of these types of emotional problem in childhood predict clinical depression and anxiety in adolescence and young adulthood.

Main findings

- Most children (86%) have consistently low levels of emotional problems\(^1\) from age 4 to 8 ("low-stable" pattern)
- For those with higher levels of emotional problems, two different patterns of problems are found (see Figure below left):
  - "Earlier onset" (6% of children), starting high, then decreasing slightly
  - "Later onset" (8% of children), starting at moderate levels and increasing sharply from around the time children started school.

Patterns of emotional problems from ages 4 to 8

Note: bars show 95% confidence intervals for mean problem scores.

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\(^1\) Mothers reported on the child’s socio-emotional adjustment on four occasions (child aged 46, 58, 70 and 94 months) using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). This study used the combined five-item peer relationships and five-item emotional problems subscales.
Both elevated patterns of emotional problems are predicted by several similar early life risk factors.

There are also several differences between factors associated with each elevated pattern, and their timing (see diagram below).

Differences suggest possible reasons for earlier vs. later onset of emotional problems:
- Earlier Onset – more early risk, including more early conduct problems.
- Later Onset – moderate early risk creates vulnerability to school adjustment problems.

Factors associated with development of earlier and later onset emotional problems

![Diagram showing the development of emotional problems over time with early childhood factors, conduct problems at preschool age, initial school adjustment problems, and later onset emotional problems.]

Implications for practice

- Teachers and other education practitioners should strive to identify children with moderate, as well as those with more severe, emotional problems at primary school entry.
- Children with moderate emotional problems may have relatively low initial levels of associated “visible” classroom behaviour problems, but are nonetheless vulnerable to school adjustment difficulties.
- Support is required to ensure difficulty adjusting to school does not produce further increases in emotional problems for this group of children.

Further details of this research are published in Parkes A, Sweeting H, Wight D. Early childhood precursors and school age correlates of different internalising problem trajectories among young children. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology 2016;[epub ahead of print] open access

For more information on the Growing Up in Scotland study, please visit http://growingupinscotland.org.uk/