



Communicating Research in Clear Language

DIAGNOSTIC SYMPTOMS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

What is the research about?

Previous research has shown that in addition to the core diagnostic symptoms – social communication deficits and repetitive, restricted, stereotyped behaviours – children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) show other problem behaviours traditionally associated with disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). However, the relationship between these symptoms and behaviours is not well understood in children with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used information from the “Pathways in ASD” study to examine the relationship between core diagnostic symptoms and problem behaviours in preschool children with ASD. Parent-report and direct child observation methods were used to collect the data on 335 newly diagnosed children with ASD. Statistical techniques were used to analyze the data and describe the relationships across symptoms and problem behaviours in ASD.

What did the researchers find?

- Compared to typically developing children (population norms) children with ASD have more problem behaviours. The most common behaviours are withdrawal, attention, and emotional reactivity.
- The presentation of core diagnostic symptoms – social communication deficits and repetitive, restricted, stereotyped behaviours – appears to overlap with the presentation of other problems behaviours in preschool children with ASD.
- Higher levels of symptoms and problem behaviours in children with ASD are associated with increased parental stress.

Take home message

Study findings challenge the traditional diagnostic definition of ASD which was based only on “core symptoms” and provide support for the newly revised diagnostic criteria for ASD that include additional “clinical specifiers” such as problem behaviours. This new way of thinking about symptoms and problem behaviours associated with ASD offers a more complete picture of the challenges associated with the disorder.

NOTE: The original [Research Report](#) was written by S. Georgiades and associates from the Pathways in ASD Study Team and was published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* in 2011.