

Associations between emotional difficulties in children and young people (CYP) and school attendance problems (SAPs): A systematic review

Dr Anna Rose-Morris¹, Dr Katie Finning², Dr Obi Ukoumunne², Dr Darren Moore³, Professor Tamsin Ford^{2,4}

¹Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust, ²University of Exeter Medical School, ³University of Exeter Graduate School of Education, ⁴University of Cambridge

BACKGROUND

Emotional disorders are among the most prevalent mental health conditions experienced by children and young people (CYP)¹. Previous research suggests a relationship between emotional difficulties and school attendance problems (SAPs). Evidence for this link dates back at least as far as the 1960s², supported also by more recent data³.

SAPs may therefore be an important indicator of emotional difficulties in CYP.

We aimed to systematically review the evidence for an association between emotional difficulties and SAPs. We hypothesised that emotional difficulties would be associated with higher rates of SAPs.

METHODS

- This study was conducted within a larger review investigating associations between anxiety, depression, and emotional difficulties with SAPs.
- Initial searches were conducted in December 2016 and updated in March 2020. We searched eight electronic databases, and sources of unpublished literature, supplemented with citation chasing and contact with experts and lead authors of included studies.
- Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts followed by full texts.

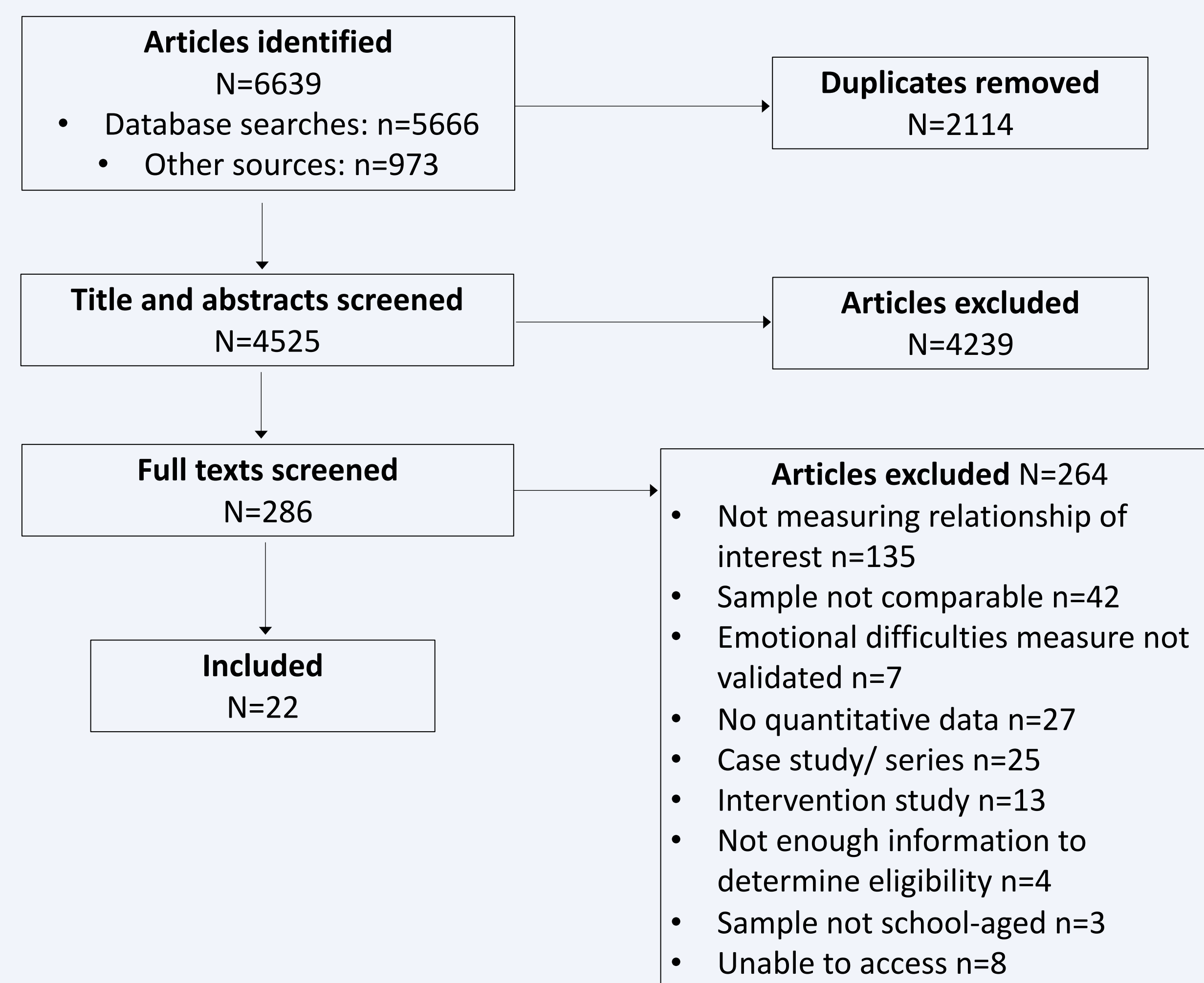
ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Quantitative studies in school-aged CYP
- Reporting on the association between emotional difficulties and any type of SAP
- English language; any country, any date
- Emotional difficulties assessed via symptoms measured on a validated scale or diagnostic measure for emotional disorders
- Any terminology/ method of measuring school attendance

RESULTS

- Studies were from 8 countries across North America, Europe and Asia. Sample sizes up to 14,428, with CYP aged 5 to 23.
- Results from moderate quality studies suggested a small, positive, cross-sectional association between emotional difficulties and overall **absenteeism**.
- One high quality study found a small, positive, cross-sectional association with **authorised absence**.
- There was mixed evidence from nine studies for an association with **unauthorised absence** or **truancy**.
- One study found a large, positive, cross-sectional association with **school refusal**.
- Study quality was generally poor, and there was very little longitudinal research.

IDENTIFICATION OF STUDIES



CONCLUSIONS

- Emotional difficulties are associated with higher rates of various types of SAP.
- Further high-quality research is needed, particularly to explore the relationship with authorised school absence, and to investigate longitudinal associations.
- Teachers, clinicians and other professionals should be aware that SAPs might be a marker for emotional difficulties, and should consider what support CYP might need as a result.

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