**Assessing behaviour in children aged 12-24 months using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**

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**Abstract**

**Background and aims**

Behavioural and emotional problems in young children are common, can be persistent and are risk factors for developing mental health problems in later life. Accurate, efficient and well-tested behavioural assessment tools that are brief, and acceptable to use are needed as there is a paucity of data for assessments for children below two years of age. The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) has been validated in children twelve months and above, but is lengthy to complete. Shorter, effective assessments are needed in this age group. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) could offer convenience for clinicians, researchers and parents but lacks psychometric validation in very young children. This study aimed to assess the validity, reliability and acceptability of the SDQ, a short behavioural assessment, in children aged 12-24 months through comparison with a longer more established assessment, the CBCL.

**Methods**

Ninety-three participants were recruited to complete an online questionnaire including the SDQ and CBCL, a Likert scale to rate the ease of completion and applicability of both questionnaires, and a section for general comments. Validity of the SDQ was assessed through comparison with the CBCL.

**Results**

Key subscales of the SDQ and the CBCL were significantly associated, with the SDQ ‘Hyperactivity’ (r=0.46), ‘Conduct’ (r=0.43) and ‘Externalising’ scales (r=0.55) showing a high correlation with the CBCL ‘Externalising’ scale. The corresponding ‘Total’ (r=0.56) scales on the SDQ and the CBCL, as well as the CBCL ‘Internalising’ and SDQ ‘Emotional’ scales were also correlated (r=0.42). Analysis of Cronbach alphas obtained from subscale scores revealed moderate reliability for the ‘Hyperactivity’ (0.67), ‘Prosocial’ (0.72), ‘Externalising’ (0.65), and ‘Total’ (0.60) scales, but not the emotional and conduct scales. The SDQ achieved a significantly higher rated ‘ease of application’ and ‘ease of completion’ when compared to the CBCL, for participants with children aged 18-24 months, with the inverse reported by participants with children aged 12-18 months.

**Conclusions**

This study is the first to investigate the use of the SDQ in children aged 12-24 months, and shows acceptable reliability and validity for the ‘Total’ and externalising subscales (i.e. behavioural problems). However, further validation is required in larger, representative samples before the SDQ is widely used as a behavioural measure in this age group. It is possible that alterations to the wording of some items may be necessary to optimise the SDQ for use in 12-24-month-old children.

Keywords: Behavioural assessment, child psychopathology, child behavioural problems, infant mental health, SDQ