

Autistic spectrum disorder in children after early severe neglect and maltreatment

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Background

The finding of 'quasi-autism' and other autistic features in children adopted into U.K. following severe institutional deprivation (Rutter et al 1999), was important in suggesting a possible environment-related aetiology for an autism phenotype. A question has remained as to whether such autistic-like impairments might *also* be found in children adopted after early severe maltreatment or neglect in countries not using institutional care.

Objectives

A systematic investigation into the presence of ASD in children after severe early neglect and maltreatment.

Methods

60 domestically adopted children (mean age 102 months (SD 20); 47% male) were recruited via a UK national membership charity (Adoption-UK) for a study into general developmental social outcomes after adoption. Seventy-three percent had experienced severe maltreatment. Mean age at admission to out-of-home care was 11 months (SD 15), mean age at adoption was 35 months (SD 27) and mean number of previous placements was 2.5 (SD 1.8). Initial screening used adoptive parent report on DAWBA, confirmed by expert clinical symptom review (a child psychiatrist blind to other details). Individuals screening positively for ASD were invited to a second phase phenotyping, including: i) detailed interview data on birth-family history of ASD, psychopathology, and substance or alcohol misuse in pregnancy; ii) ADI-R and ADOS-G; iii) physical examination including biometrics and minor physical anomalies (MPA); iv) clinical assessment.

Results

21/53 (40%) children screened ASD positive. 16 of these have had phase 2 exam to date; with 5 (10% of the whole cohort screened) showing ASD, and 8 (17%) partial features (CPEA criteria). Pattern of detailed phenomenology are similar to ERA findings. Birth family history of autism was found in one case, confirmed or suspected prenatal drug or alcohol exposure in 7 cases, fetal alcohol syndrome in 1 case. MPAs were not correlated with autism scores. Most of the children had experience profound neglect in the early months of life.

Conclusions

This represents the first systematic data obtained on the prevalence of ASD in a high-risk adoption sample from non-institutionalized care, along with review of possible aetiological factors. The findings of substantial rates of ASD in this population have important theoretical and clinical implications.