

Potentially traumatic events, post-traumatic symptoms and mental illness in kids under assessment for ADHD or autism

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the present study was to investigate the extent to which children investigated for ADHD and/or autism have been exposed to potentially traumatic events (PTE) and developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress or other mental illness.

Method: The study was of cross-sectional design. 62 children, 8-17 years old, referred for assessment of ADHD and/or autism at the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (BUP) in Karlstad were included. Descriptive data of exposure to PTE were analyzed and compared against a norm group. Posttraumatic symptoms as well as symptoms of other mental illnesses were examined descriptively and tested for significance.

Results: The results showed that the study group had a characteristically high frequency of PTE (type value 5), in particular interpersonal PTE. They generally had a significantly higher degree of symptoms of trauma and other mental illnesses. Many exceeded cut-off values for, for example, post-traumatic symptoms, dissociation, anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and peer problems. An analysis of gender and age differences for post-traumatic symptoms showed generally higher scores for girls than boys and for older children compared with younger. Furthermore, several significant correlations for interpersonal PTE and symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, anger and dissociation) were obtained.

Conclusions: Children and adolescents, assessed for ADHD and/or autism, are a highly exposed group concerning PTE and heavily symptom-laden. It is prominent that interpersonal PTE is extra common, and that particularly girls between the ages of 12-17 scored surprisingly high on post-traumatic symptoms.