Quality of Peer Relationships Among Children with Selective Mutism

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Abstract

The current study examined the quality of peer relationships among children with selective mutism. Previous research suggests that children who are selectively mute have difficulty making friends and have poorer outcomes in terms of their social development. The current study aims to evaluate how children with selective mutism maintain their social relationships. A clinically significant finding was the lack of social integration of the children with selective mutism. Children with selective mutism often do not engage in conversation and have difficulty making friends. This has significant implications for developing effective interventions.

Introduction

Selective Mutism

Selective mutism is a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (fifth edition) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is characterized by a selective failure to speak in specific situations. Children with selective mutism often have difficulty making friends and have poor outcomes in terms of social development.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 is that children with selective mutism will be reported by their parents as having a significantly lower number of close friends than children without selective mutism. Hypothesis 2 is that children with selective mutism will be reported by their peers as not liked by other children. Hypothesis 3 is that children with selective mutism will have trouble making friends, keeping friends and fear joining conversations as reported by their parents.

Methods

Participants

The group of 25 children (5 girls and 20 boys) included boys and girls aged 6-12 years. The sample was recruited from the community and included children with and without selective mutism.

Measures

The following measures were used: the Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule—Parent Version (ADIS-P), the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), and the Social Problems Scale (SPS).

Results

Hypothesis 1 was supported. Children with selective mutism were found to have a significantly lower number of close friends than children without selective mutism. Hypothesis 2 was supported. Children with selective mutism were reported by their peers as not liked by other children. Hypothesis 3 was supported. Children with selective mutism were reported by their parents as having difficulty making friends, keeping friends, and fear joining conversations.

Discussion

Previous research has reported that children with selective mutism may be reported by their peers and experience few friends (Shawky & McNicholas, 2010). However, findings from the current study support that children with selective mutism have a range of close friends, and also tend to get along well with and are liked by other peers. Therefore, supportive and collaborative interventions aimed at increasing social interactions and decreasing anxiety are recommended.

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