

Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties: Are They at Risk for Exhibiting Abusive Parenting Interactions

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the parenting and child-rearing attitudes of adolescents living in Great Britain who had been assessed as having moderate learning difficulties. Previously, these adolescents would have been described as mildly mentally retarded or mentally handicapped. The research attempted to determine whether these adolescents expressed attitudes which may place them "at risk" for future inappropriate parent-child relationships. Current theories related to child abuse focus on parenting attitudes and child-rearing practices of abusive parents. The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) is a normed instrument used to identify adults/adolescents who are at risk to become abusive parents. The inventory assesses four areas of common parenting difficulties. The results of the AAPI scores for the special needs group were compared to scores for non-abused and abused adolescents, as well as to findings from a similar study of adolescents with moderate learning difficulties in the United States. The findings show that the special needs adolescents from both countries exhibited more inappropriate attitudes toward parenting than either abused or non-abused adolescents. This study indicates that the adolescents who have moderate learning difficulties are "at risk" for inappropriate parenting interactions.

Study

The purpose of the current study (in England) was to assess the parenting attitudes of adolescents who had been identified as having moderate learning difficulties and were enrolled in a special school. There has been a growing concern about the lack of knowledge regarding child care and nurturing parenting skills of special needs students. They often receive little or no formal education in this area and often lack appropriate modeling by significant others, yet they become independent adults within communities, working, marrying, raising children (Graff, 1983; Loadman and Vaughan, 1986). This study attempted to determine if these special needs students express attitudes which may place them "at risk" for future inappropriate parent-child relationships.

Subjects

The AAPI was administered to 28 adolescents who had all been identified as special needs students and were enrolled in a state-supported school in England. The school was a special school for students with moderate learning difficulties, ages 5-16. The school was involved in a number of mainstreaming projects with a nearby upper school; however, the majority of the students were primarily educated within the special school. In addition to the AAPI, the respondents were also asked to fill out an informational questionnaire.

Female respondents outnumbered the male respondents (17 females/11 males). All of the students were 14-15 years old except one who was 16-17 years old. Over half of the students plan to marry within the near future and more than 60 percent plan to be a parent some day.

Results

The following tables show the information obtained from the AAPI administered to each participant. The lower the score on the AAPI, the greater the risk is for inappropriate parent-child relationships.

Table I is a comparison of the mean scores for four different groups: adolescents with moderate learning difficulties in the present study, adolescents with moderate learning disabilities in the U.S. study (Svobodny, 1987), abused adolescents, and non-abused adolescents. The mean scores for the abused adolescent and non-abused adolescent populations used in this study came from the AAPI established norms for these two groups.

The AAPI was standardized with a group of 305 abused adolescents and a group of 6,480 non-abused adolescents.

Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties: United States

The T-test was used to compare the mean scores of the adolescents with moderate learning difficulties from The U.S. (n = 56) on each construct of the AAPI to the mean scores of the abused and non-abused groups. The findings indicate that these special needs adolescents exhibit significantly more inappropriate attitudes toward parenting than either abused or non-abused adolescent groups. Their scores on every construct were significantly lower than the non-abused adolescent population. The only construct on which they did not score significantly lower than the abused population was that of physical punishment. Their mean score was lower but not at a significant level. However, scores by both the adolescents with moderate learning difficulties and the abused adolescents reflect an inappropriate attitude toward the use of physical punishment.

Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties: England

The mean scores of the adolescents from England (n=28) on the AAPI provide very similar results, overall, to those obtained from the U.S. study with special needs adolescents. However, it is interesting to note that there are several differences. On Construct A: Inappropriate Expectations, this group had a mean score exactly the same as the non-abused group. This would indicate that the adolescents surveyed, score in the normal range as far as expectations of children are concerned. On Constructs B and C, those adolescents scored higher than the U.S. adolescents with moderating learning difficulties, but lower than abused adolescents, thus indicating an "at-risk" factor. Construct D: Role Reversal appears to be a significant indicator for the possibility of problems. The current group of adolescents scored lower than all of the other three groups on Construct D. It is interesting to note that the largest difference in male/female mean scores was on Construct D also.

This would indicate that the male adolescent is much more likely to engage in inappropriate role reversal with a child. In contrast to this study in England, the U.S. special needs adolescents had no significant differences for any of the constructs between male/female respondents. However, in both studies the mean scores for the males were generally lower than those of the females, even if not at a significant level. This would correspond to the findings of several studies that males exhibit more abusive attitudes than females (Bavolek, 1980; Green and Calder, 1978; Meza-Lehman, 1983).

Table I

Adolescent Parenting Inventory Mean Scores Comparison: Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties Abused Adolescents/Non-Abused Adolescents		
	MEAN SCORE	T VALUE
Construct A: Inappropriate Expectations		
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties: England	21.28	
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties (U.S.)	19.661	
Abused Adolescents	21.17	2.186+
Non-Abused Adolescents	21.28	2.345+
Construct B: Empathy		
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties: England	23.71	
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties (U.S.)	22.054	
Abused Adolescents	23.93	2.531+
Non-Abused Adolescents	30.14	4.459+
Construct C: Physical Punishment		
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties: England	30.14	
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties (U.S.)	28.750	
Abused Adolescents	30.60	1.679
Non-Abused Adolescents	31.67	2.649+
Construct D: Role Reversal		
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties: England	18.07	
Adolescents: Moderate Learning Difficulties (U.S.)	18.661	
Abused Adolescents	21.23	3.135+
Non-Abused Adolescents	22.24	4.369+
+ Significant at 0.15 level – comparing Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties (U.S.) to Abused/Non-Abused Adolescents		

Table II

Adolescents with Moderate Learning Difficulties: England				
	Construct A (Expectations)	Construct B (Empathy)	Construct C (Punishment)	Construct D (Role Reversal)
Females	21.295	23.823	30.823	20.411
Males	21.272	23.545	29.090	14.454

This study indicates that the adolescent population described as having moderate learning difficulties (male and females) may be at risk for inappropriate parenting interactions. This may, in part, indicate the possibility that some of the adolescents in this group have been abused or the subject of inappropriate relationships in their personal experiences. It may also indicate that because of their learning handicap, they may not have developed appropriate expectations, they may be immature, and they may not understand the parenting role. Whatever the reasons for their low scores, it is obvious that these adolescents appear to be a high-risk group in terms of the possibilities of becoming abusive parents.

References

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