The Existence of Sensory Processing Difficulties in Children with Behaviour Problems

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Introduction

Children requiring extra support in school for behaviour problems are not being routinely assessed for sensory processing difficulties.

They are being treated using behavioural and or cognitive methods, which do not fully improve their ability to learn and engage appropriately within the classroom, and any sensory processing problems remain.

Schools tend to utilize approaches of nurturing and instruction (O’Brien, 2007), which tend to suppress presenting behaviours rather than tackling the underlying causes.

These children continue to struggle to engage and subsequently learn in the classroom. This may be a result of a failure in the identification of sensory processing difficulties, alongside or leading to behaviour difficulties.

Exploration of whether they co-exist is essential, and hence this review.

Methods

A systematic literature review was completed of the health and social science literature using a search strategy developed for Medline with combinations of the search terms sensory processing, sensory integration, sensory modulation, sensory based motor disorder, dyspraxia, and developmental coordination disorder.

This search strategy was modified for use with nine electronic databases.

The search was limited to primary research papers published between 2003 and 2014, and written in English.

The methodology, interventions, results and quality of evidence were critically reviewed using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta Analysis (PRISMA).

Results

- Auditory filtering or sensitivity and behaviour problems
- Sensory seeking and externalising behaviour problems
- Sensory processing total scores and internalising behaviour
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- Emerging patterns between sensory processing and behaviour

Statistical correlations from the studies were analysed individually and patterns and themes from the data identified, compared and contrasted in terms of significance (or lack of) in the relationship between sensory processing and problem behaviour across children with different clinical diagnoses. The relationship between sensory processing and problem behaviour was explored with varying patterns emerging among clinical populations and typically developing children.

Conclusion

Results demonstrate a relationship exists between behaviour problems and sensory processing difficulties, thus highlighting that a more complex problem exists.

It is suggested that when children present for initial assessment due to behaviour problems, assessment of sensory processing should be incorporated.

Schools and therapists should be made aware of this relationship and of the subsequent need to integrate the two approaches to be more effective with these children.

Emerging primary findings demonstrate the need for sensory processing assessments to be incorporated into the general assessment of children with behaviour problems.

This highlights the need for staff development to raise awareness of this need, and to facilitate continuity of care and collaboration within the educational environment.

References