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UNDERSTANDING ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The general objective of the present study is to analyze the scientific production on Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) in children and adolescents, seeking to identify the main clinical manifestations, as well as the comorbidities that are associated with the disorder. Methodology: Searches were carried out through searches in the PubMed Central (PMC) databases. Three descriptors were used in combination with the Boolean term "AND": clinical manifestations, antisocial personality disorder, child, conduct disorder, and pediatrics, mental disorders. A total of 371 articles were found, which were subsequently submitted to the selection criteria. A total of 17 studies were selected. Results: ASPD in children and adolescents is characterized by persistent behaviors that violate the rights of others and social norms, such as aggression, destruction of property, and manipulation. Common comorbidities include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Conduct Disorder, and a lower amount of gray matter in areas of the brain such as limbic structures and the amygdala. Other risk factors identified are chronic exposure to violence, abuse and neglect in childhood, as well as injuries or dysfunctions of the central nervous system.

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Conclusion: SPD is associated with several comorbidities that can amplify problematic behaviors and hinder effective intervention. Early identification and multifaceted interventions are essential to mitigate the development of antisocial behaviors and promote healthy emotional and social development. Public policies that prioritize children's mental health and awareness programs are essential to destigmatize mental disorders and encourage the search for help.

Keywords: Antisocial Personality Disorder. Comorbidities. Clinical Manifestations. Children. Adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), often understood as a set of characteristics that manifest themselves in childhood or adolescence, has been a topic of great interest in the field of psychology and psychiatry throughout history. Although historically the concept of psychopathy was initially linked to adults, today there is a growing recognition that these traits can emerge at an early age, which leads to the need for a deeper investigation into their manifestations in pediatric populations (JOURNAL OF HEALTH SCIENCES - REVIVA, 2023).

In the Kaplan and Sadock Compendium of Psychiatry (2022, p. 45), the diagnosis of psychopathy in children is not used. In this context, the book describes conduct disorder, which can be identified in childhood and adolescence. This disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern of behaviors that violate the rights of others or social norms, such as aggression, destruction of property, and deception. Children with conduct disorder are at increased risk of developing psychopathy in adulthood, but the formal diagnosis of psychopathy is reserved for adults (Kaplan; Sadock, 2017, p. 45). Thus, it is conduct disorder that occupies a central role in the early identification of behavioral patterns that can evolve into ASD (JORNAL DA USP, 2021).

Although conduct disorder serves as an early indicator, the diagnosis of psychopathy in young people still faces major challenges. Psychopathy, as a personality disorder, is recognized as having roots in childhood and adolescence, according to Cleckley (1940). However, the formal diagnosis of psychopathy in children and adolescents is problematic. Historically, researchers such as McCord and McCord, in the 60s, observed that the characteristics of psychopathy in young populations differ from those found in adults, leading to conceptual confusion in psychopathological classification. The definition of psychopathy and its early identification are still underexplored areas of research (DAVOGLIO et al., 2012).

Given the complexity of diagnosis and overlapping behaviors, understanding the epidemiology of ASPD is essential. The literature indicates that antisocial behaviors typical of adolescence can be confused with psychopathic traits, since characteristics such as impulsivity and irresponsibility are common at this stage of development. This makes it difficult to distinguish between normal adolescent behaviors and those that may signal a personality disorder. Several authors, such as Seagrave and Grisso (2002), argue that, although some psychopathic traits may manifest in adolescents, many are common to youth development and should not be interpreted as indicators of psychopathy (DAVOGLIO et al., 2012).

In addition, the absence of validated diagnostic instruments for young populations and the variability of psychopathic traits throughout development underscore the complexity of this assessment. The focus should be on identifying affective and interpersonal characteristics that differentiate psychopathy from other common childhood disorders. Empirical research with young people is essential to understand the nuances of development and the implications of psychopathic traits, avoiding hasty diagnoses that do not consider the normal evolution of behavior in adolescence (JORNAL DA USP, 2021).

Understanding the prevalence of these disorders can help contextualize the diagnostic challenges and the need for intervention strategies. ASPD is a neuropsychiatric disorder that is much more common than you might think, affecting about 1% to 2% of the world's population, that is, one in every hundred people, according to academic studies. Considering this statistic, in Brazil alone, there would be 2 to 4 million people (JORNAL DA USP, 2021). Prevalence rates of conduct disorder in the US range from 6 to 16% for men and from 2 to 9% for women. The disorder is more common in children of parents with antisocial personality disorder and alcohol dependence. In addition, prevalence is also associated with socioeconomic factors and parental psychopathology (ENGLER et al., 2022).

The objective of this study is to analyze and review the literature on antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) in pediatric populations, in order to better understand the early manifestations of these traits. Through a review of the existing literature, we seek to identify the diagnostic challenges, the efficacy of the instruments used and the epidemiology of ASPD, differentiating behaviors typical of adolescence from those that signal a personality disorder. This knowledge can guide the creation of new diagnostic tools and evidence-based interventions, preventing the progression of conduct disorder to ASPD in adulthood and, consequently, improving management and treatment from childhood.

METHODOLOGY

This is a systematic review that seeks to understand the clinical aspects of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) in children and adolescents, aiming to ensure greater knowledge about the clinical picture and diagnosis of this disorder, as well as to demonstrate the main associated comorbidities. For the development of this research, a guiding question was elaborated through the PVO strategy (population, variable and objective): "What are the clinical manifestations of Antisocial Personality Disorder in children and adolescents, as well as their possible comorbidities?"

The searches were carried out through searches in the PubMed Central (PMC) databases. Three descriptors were used in combination with the Boolean term "AND": clinical manifestations, antisocial personality disorder, child, conduct disorder, pediatrics, and mental disorders. The search strategy used in the PMC database was: (clinical manifestations) AND (antisocial personality disorder) AND (child) and (conduct disorder) AND (pediatrics) AND (mental disorders). From this search, 371 articles were found, which were later submitted to the selection criteria.

The inclusion criteria were: articles in English, Portuguese and Spanish; published in the period from 2019 to 2023 and that addressed the themes proposed for this research. In addition, review, observational and experimental studies, which were made available in full, were considered. The exclusion criteria were: duplicate articles, available in the form of abstracts, that did not directly address the proposal studied and that did not meet the other inclusion criteria.

After associating the descriptors used in the database, a total of 371 articles were found. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 17 studies were selected, 11 of which were used to compose the collection and 8 to participate in the critical analysis of the systematic review.

RESULTS

Table 1: Source Table created by the author

Revised work	Major Contributions
Biederman et al., 2020	She contributed with information on the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in the treatment of children with psychopathic traits, emphasizing the importance of developing social skills, regulating emotions, and modifying dysfunctional thought patterns.
Engler et al., 2022	He stressed the importance of early intervention programs and training for parents and educators, enabling them to recognize warning signs and implement effective support strategies.
Hawes et al., 2021	He presented data on the importance of schools that implement bullying prevention and social inclusion programs, contributing to the mitigation of antisocial behaviors. It also highlighted the need for effective collaboration between mental health professionals, educators, and parents.
Poore et al., 2020	He identified characteristics of children with psychopathic traits, such as being manipulated and superficially charming, and highlighted the difficulty in identifying these traits. He also stressed the importance of participating in physical activities and sports in emotional regulation.
Perlstein et al., 2022	He emphasized the importance of promoting socio-emotional skills from childhood in schools, in order to contribute to the emotional development of children. He stressed the need for an integrated approach in schools to deal with children with psychopathic traits.
Kleine Deters et al., 2023	He discussed the importance of public policies that prioritize children's mental health and well-being, investing in prevention and intervention programs to mitigate risk factors associated with the development of psychopathic traits.

Naaijen et al., 2020	It addressed the need to consider cultural and contextual factors when treating children with psychopathic traits, highlighting the cultural variability in the perception and treatment of psychopathy. It also highlighted the importance of a comprehensive social and cultural environment for more effective interventions.
Magalotti et al., 2019	She contributed with information on the usefulness of the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD) to identify psychopathic traits in young people, emphasizing the evaluation of behaviors such as emotional insensitivity, impulsivity, and manipulation.

DISCUSSION

The etiology of ASPD is multifaceted, and risk factors include impulsivity, child maltreatment, poor parental supervision and strict discipline, low IQ, and school performance. In this sense, the chaotic environment at home, divorce with persistent hostility and parental psychopathology are also relevant. Genetic and environmental factors equally contribute to the variation of conduct disorder (ENGLER et al., 2022). Sociocultural factors also play a significant role. Living in areas of high population density, unemployed parents, and lack of community support increase the risk. In addition, the use of alcohol and drugs in adolescents is associated with delinquent and aggressive behaviors (POORE et al., 2020).

With regard to psychological factors, poor emotional regulation among young people is linked to higher levels of aggression and conduct disorder (HANNIGAN et al., 2021). Additionally, studies show that children with conduct disorder have lower gray matter in certain areas of the brain, such as limbic structures and the amygdala (PERLSTEIN et al., 2022). On the other hand, chronic exposure to childhood violence, abuse, and neglect increases the risk of aggressive behavior (MAGALOTTI et al., 2019). In addition, it is important to consider that ADHD often precedes the development of conduct disorder and sometimes substance abuse. In addition, central nervous system injuries or dysfunctions are also associated with impulsive and disruptive behaviors (NAAIJEN et al., 2020).

In children, behaviors that violate basic rights and social norms are often diagnosed as conduct disorder. These behaviors include aggression, cruelty, lies, theft, among others. In adults, these behaviors can develop into antisocial personality disorder, often associated with what many call psychopathy. Although labels and some diagnostic criteria change with age, the essence of problematic behaviors and the violation of the rights of others remain constant (KOHLS et al., 2020). In short, psychopathy cannot be diagnosed in children and adolescents due to the complex and dynamic nature of development, the overlapping of normal adolescent traits with psychopathic characteristics, and the lack of appropriate diagnostic tools. This highlights the need for caution and a more contextualized approach to

understand antisocial behaviors in this age group, in addition to reinforcing the importance of future investigations on the subject. (KOHLS et al., 2020)

DEFINITION AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOPATHY IN PEDIATRIC PATIENTS

Psychopathy, often related to Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), is a personality disorder that is characterized by a lack of empathy, manipulative behaviors, impulsivity, and a willingness to violate social norms. When we talk about psychopathy in childhood, it is essential to recognize that behaviors can manifest themselves differently than in adults. Children with psychopathic characteristics may demonstrate a lack of remorse or guilt after acting in a harmful way, making it difficult to learn from negative experiences (KOHLS et al., 2020). This inability to connect emotionally with others can translate into problematic interpersonal relationships and, in some cases, violent behavior. They tend to display an emotional coldness, being unable to perceive or react appropriately to the emotions of others, such as sadness or pain. This behavior can manifest itself in aggressive, cruel, and violent actions, such as disrespect for norms and the absence of regret after harmful behaviors. The absence of negative emotions is one of the main indicators of childhood psychopathy and is often associated with impulsive and disruptive behavior (POORE et al., 2020).

A common trait in children with psychopathy is impulsivity. This impulsivity can result in risky actions and difficulty controlling emotions, leading to angry outbursts or challenging behaviors. Many of these behaviors become more pronounced during adolescence, when children begin to explore boundaries and engage in risky activities (POORE et al., 2020). Impulsivity, combined with a lack of empathy, can lead to a cycle of problematic behaviors that perpetuates itself over time. Furthermore, childhood psychopathy is not simply a "minor" version of adult ASPD. Children may exhibit a combination of behaviors that do not fit neatly into traditional definitions of conduct disorders or behavior deviance. The multifaceted nature of childhood psychopathy requires careful analysis and a comprehensive understanding of how these traits develop and manifest. The absence of remorse, which is a central characteristic of ASPD, hinders the development of healthy social and emotional skills. Anger and irritability are also emotions that often accompany psychopathic characteristics. Children with such traits may have difficulties managing their emotions, leading to outbursts of anger and aggressive behavior. This difficulty in regulating emotions is a critical factor that contributes to the escalation of problematic behaviors and, if left unaddressed, can lead to a worsening of problems (PERLSTEIN et al., 2022).

Research shows that children who exhibit psychopathic behaviors can be manipulative and charming on the surface. They can use their charisma to achieve personal goals by deceiving and manipulating those around them (POORE et al., 2020). This makes identifying psychopathic traits even more challenging, as these children may present themselves in a socially acceptable manner while continuing to exhibit harmful behaviors in other circumstances. In addition, it is important to note that childhood psychopathy is not an isolated condition. Often, these children may have comorbidities, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Conduct Disorder, further complicating diagnosis and treatment (BIEDERMAN et al., 2020). These comorbidities can amplify problem behaviors and hinder effective intervention.

Understanding the characteristics and behaviors associated with psychopathy in children is crucial for the implementation of effective interventions. As we explore treatment approaches and prevention strategies, it is essential to consider the role of schools and society in identifying and supporting children who have these traits in order to promote healthier emotional and social development.

FAMILY DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

The family environment plays a key role in the development of psychopathic traits in children. Studies suggest that dysfunctional homes, characterized by abuse, neglect, or lack of supervision, are associated with an increased risk of antisocial behaviors (KOHLS et al., 2020). The presence of inconsistent parental patterns, such as severe discipline alternating with indulgence, can contribute to the formation of psychopathic characteristics in children (ENGLER et al., 2022). This dynamic emphasizes the importance of interventions that address both the child and his family, promoting a healthier environment that is favorable to emotional development.

The influence of peers should also be considered. Social interactions with other children can shape behaviors and attitudes. Exposure to groups that promote antisocial behaviors can intensify psychopathic traits and increase the likelihood of problem behaviors (PERLSTEIN et al., 2022). Therefore, it is critical for educators and mental health professionals to consider social context and peer influences when assessing and treating children with psychopathic traits.

In addition, the issue of juvenile crime cannot be ignored. Many young people who develop psychopathic behaviors end up engaging in criminal activity, creating a cycle of delinquency that can be difficult to break. Understanding the factors that lead to this crime

is essential for the development of effective prevention and intervention programs (HAWES et al., 2021).

DIAGNOSIS AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The diagnosis of psychopathy in children, particularly in relation to ASPD, is a complex field, in part due to the overlap of symptoms with other psychiatric conditions, such as Conduct Disorder and ADHD (HANNIGAN et al., 2021). The use of assessment tools, such as the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD), has been shown to be useful in identifying psychopathic traits in young people (MAGALOTTI et al., 2019). The APSD evaluates behaviors associated with psychopathy, such as emotional insensitivity, impulsivity, and manipulation.

However, the diagnosis should be made with caution. Labeling a child as a "psychopath" can have negative consequences, such as stigmatization and social exclusion (KOHLS et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential that mental health professionals adopt a balanced approach when diagnosing and treating children, taking into account not only the behaviors observed, but also the context in which they occur.

Early identification of psychopathic traits is crucial, as intervention in early stages can help prevent the worsening of behaviors and their consequences. Regular screening in school and clinical settings can contribute to the early detection of at-risk children, allowing for targeted interventions (PERLSTEIN et al., 2022). In addition, ongoing training of mental health professionals and educators on psychopathy and its effects is essential to ensure that interventions are informed and evidence-based. Training should include recognition of warning signs and best practices for dealing with children who exhibit problem behaviors.

INTERVENTIONS AND TREATMENTS

The treatment of childhood psychopathy should be multifaceted, involving a combination of therapeutic approaches and family involvement. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most widely used approaches, helping children develop social skills, regulate emotions, and modify dysfunctional thought patterns (BIEDERMAN et al., 2020). CBT can be tailored to meet the specific needs of children with psychopathic traits, emphasizing empathy and conflict resolution. Early intervention programs are essential to address problematic behaviors in children. These programs can include training for parents and educators, enabling them to recognize warning signs and implement effective support strategies (ENGLER et al., 2022). Active parental participation is key, as a positive family environment can promote behavior change and healthy emotional development.

In addition, promoting social skills and creating a safe and welcoming school environment are key to treating child psychopathy. Schools that implement bullying prevention programs and promote social inclusion can help mitigate the development of antisocial behaviors (HAWES et al., 2021). Collaboration between mental health professionals, educators, and parents is crucial to ensure that children receive the support they need in all aspects of their lives. In addition, interventions that encourage physical activity and involvement in sports can have a positive impact on emotional regulation and the development of social skills. Participation in collective activities helps children learn to work as a team, respect rules, and develop a sense of empathy towards others (POORE et al., 2020).

THE SCHOOL AS AN ENVIRONMENT OF INTERVENTION

Schools are critical places for identifying and intervening in psychopathic behaviors. Educators are in a unique position to observe children's behaviors in social and academic contexts. Implementing mental health awareness programs in schools can help equip teachers and staff with the tools they need to recognize and address problematic behaviors (PERLSTEIN et al., 2022).

The formation of a multidisciplinary team in schools, composed of psychologists, social workers and educators, can provide a more integrated and effective approach. This team can work together to develop personalized strategies for children with psychopathic traits, addressing their specific needs and fostering a safe and nurturing school environment. Additionally, promoting programs that teach social-emotional skills from childhood can have a positive impact on children's emotional development. These programs can include activities that emphasize empathy, conflict resolution, and teamwork, contributing to the formation of healthy and respectful relationships (HAWES et al., 2021).

THE ROLE OF SOCIETY IN PREVENTION

The creation of public policies that prioritize children's mental health and well-being is fundamental. Investments in prevention and intervention programs can help mitigate risk factors associated with the development of psychopathic traits, such as violence, abuse, and neglect (KLEINE DETERS et al., 2023). Collaboration between governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities is essential to creating a healthier and safer environment for children. Mental health awareness campaigns can help destigmatize treatment and promote help-seeking. Society should encourage open dialogues about emotional and behavioral health, reducing prejudice associated with mental disorders and

encouraging children and their families to seek support. Cultural change regarding mental health is an essential part of preventing antisocial behaviors and promoting the well-being of children in our society (KLEINE DETERS et al., 2023).

CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The manifestations of psychopathy in the pediatric population do not occur in a cultural vacuum. A society's social norms, values, and beliefs influence how psychopathy, including ASPD, is perceived and treated (NAAIJEN et al., 2020). In some cultures, for example, antisocial behaviors may be minimized or justifiably tolerated, while in others they may be severely condemned. This cultural variability highlights the importance of a sensitive approach to cultural differences when treating children with psychopathic traits. In addition, research on psychopathy in children must consider contextual factors, such as social inequality and community violence. Children who grow up in environments marked by poverty or violence may be more likely to develop problematic behaviors. Therefore, understanding the manifestations of psychopathy must take into account the social and cultural context of children, promoting interventions adapted to their realities (POORE et al., 2020).

THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS RESEARCH

Research on psychopathy in the pediatric population is still a developing field. It is essential that more studies are carried out to better understand the risk factors, manifestations, and effective interventions (BIEDERMAN et al., 2020). Collecting data on the prevalence of childhood psychopathy and its characteristics in different populations can provide valuable insights for developing more effective mental health policies and practices. Interdisciplinarity is an approach that can enrich research in this area. Collaboration between psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, and health professionals can promote a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by children with psychopathic traits (KLEINE DETERS et al., 2023). The exchange of knowledge and experience can lead to more effective and comprehensive interventions.

THE FUTURE OF PSYCHOPATHY INTERVENTION IN PEDIATRIC PATIENTS

The future of psychopathy intervention in children, especially in relation to ASPD, requires a proactive approach that goes beyond simply responding to problematic behaviors. Early identification, family support, and fostering positive environments are crucial components of helping children develop healthy social and emotional skills

(PERLSTEIN et al., 2022). Interventions should be evidence-based and tailored to the specific needs of each child, considering their life history and social context.

In addition, it is critical that mental health education becomes a priority in schools and communities. Raising awareness about psychopathy and antisocial behaviors is essential to reduce stigma and promote a deeper understanding of these disorders (HAWES et al., 2021). Education should include not only professionals, but also parents and the community at large, promoting an open dialogue about mental health.

CONCLUSION

A systematic review of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) in children and adolescents shows the complexity and multifactoriness of this condition. Risk factors such as impulsivity, child maltreatment, and dysfunctional family environments are critical. In addition, sociocultural factors and peer influence also contribute significantly.

Early assessment and interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and training programs for parents and educators, are key to mitigating antisocial behaviors. Schools play a crucial role in identifying and treating, promoting bullying prevention and social inclusion programs.

Public policies that prioritize children's mental health and awareness campaigns are essential to destigmatize mental disorders and encourage the search for help. Continued research on risk factors, manifestations, and effective interventions is vital for more effective treatment tailored to children's realities.

In short, an integrated approach that involves family, school, society, and public policies is necessary to treat and prevent childhood psychopathy, promoting healthy emotional and social development.

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