

Emotional functioning and the development of internalizing and externalizing problems in young boys with and without autism spectrum disorder

Boya Li, Marieke GN Bos, Lex Stockmann and Carolien Rieffe

Adolescents and adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have a higher risk for mental health problems than those without ASD. These include internalizing symptoms (such as anxiety and depression) and externalizing symptoms (such as hyperactivity and aggression). To prevent this, it is important to study the occurrence of these problems at the youngest possible age, and identify the factors underlying these. In this study, we examined how internalizing and externalizing problems developed during early childhood in boys with and without ASD. Furthermore, we explored the extent to which boys' emotional functioning contributed to the development of these problems. Children with ASD often have problems with controlling their own emotions as well as understanding others' emotions. Parents of 59 boys with ASD and 97 typically developing (TD) boys, aged 2 to 6 years, filled out questionnaires once a year for three consecutive years, reporting the severity of their boy's mental health symptoms and emotional functioning. We found that the two groups did not differ in the development of mental health problems over time. However, boys with ASD already had more problems than their TD peers at the start of this study, and this could be related to their lower levels of emotional functioning. Our findings highlight the importance of supporting children with ASD with emotion control, emotion understanding and emotion communication. This should be addressed at the earliest possible stage, aiming to create the most optimal supportive and interactive social environment for these children to develop.