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Developmental Age and Cognitive Impairment: a Possible Key for Treatment of Problem Behaviour

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Introduction

Problem behaviour is one of the most common reasons for admission to psychiatric hospitals in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). A psychopharmacological approach is the most applied treatment strategy. But evidence for its effectiveness is small. Hence, there is a growing interest in alternative approaches, e.g. in educational and systematic treatment of problem behaviour.

Objective

This study looks at the relation between problem behaviour and socio-emotional development in combination with the level of cognitive functioning.

Methods

Our study sample was composed of n=20 in-patients of a psychiatric unit specialized in mental health for people with IDD who were admitted due to behavioural problems. In the first step we divided the patients with the described problem behaviour into a group with more specific advices for a typical psychiatric disorder (e.g. depressed mood and social withdrawal as typical for a depressive episode) and a second group with non-specific behaviour (e.g. aggression without reason). Within these both groups we compared patients in their relation between cognitive impairment and socio-emotional level in a retrospective study design.

Results

Patients with unspecific problem behaviour had a less developed socio-emotional level compared to cognitive functions.

Discussion

A disharmonic relation between cognitive and socio-emotional levels may result in unspecific problem behaviour. These findings may be relevant for specialized treatment options and underline the need to opt, if at all, more carefully for psychopharmacological treatment strategies in patients with problem behaviour not due to a psychiatric diagnosis.