International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties among Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Descriptive Study

Ranjan D. V.[1], Chethana R Acharya[2]

[1]USN: 241MSCD00633, IV Semester, M.Sc. Clinical Psychology

[2]Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Abstract: ***Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in social communication, interaction, and behaviour. Children with ASD may also experience emotional, behavioural, attentional, and peer-related difficulties. The present study aimed to describe parent-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties among children with ASD using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional design was adopted. Five eligible participant records of children aged 4–10 years were included through purposive selection. The sample consisted of three boys and two girls. Parent-reported SDQ scores were examined across emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, total difficulties, and prosocial behaviour. Descriptive statistics, including means, sample standard deviations, medians, and ranges, were calculated. The mean emotional symptoms score was 5.60 (SD = 1.14), conduct problems was 2.40 (SD = 0.89), hyperactivity/inattention was 7.20 (SD = 1.64), and peer problems was 8.20 (SD = 1.30). The mean total difficulties score was 23.40 (SD = 3.21), while the mean prosocial behaviour score was 4.40 (SD = 2.41). Peer problems recorded the highest mean among the four difficulty domains. The findings describe only the five included records and should be interpreted cautiously due to the small sample size, descriptive design, and reliance on parent reports.***

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, emotional difficulties, behavioural difficulties, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, parent report, peer problems.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Childhood is an important period for developing communication, emotional regulation, social relationships, attention, and behavioural control. Difficulties in these areas can affect children's participation in family, educational, and social activities.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social communication and interaction, along with restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. Its presentation varies considerably among children, with individual differences in communication, social participation, emotional regulation, and support needs.

Children with ASD may also experience emotional symptoms, conduct-related concerns, hyperactivity, inattention, and peer relationship difficulties. These concerns should be understood in relation to each child's developmental characteristics and environment.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), developed by Goodman (1997), is a behavioural screening instrument that assesses emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour.

The present study describes parent-reported SDQ scores among five eligible children with ASD. It focuses on identifying the pattern of scores within the included records rather than making diagnostic or population-level conclusions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Children with ASD may experience different combinations of emotional, behavioural, attentional, and peer-related difficulties. Understanding these areas can support a more comprehensive view of their developmental needs. Therefore, the present study examines parent-reported SDQ scores across the five domains and describes the overall pattern of difficulties and prosocial behaviour.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

Aim:
To describe parent-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties among children with ASD using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Objectives:
1) To describe emotional symptoms among the included children.
2) To examine conduct problems and hyperactivity/inattention scores.
3) To describe peer problems scores.
4) To calculate total difficulties scores.
5) To examine prosocial behaviour scores.
6) To interpret the findings within the limitations of the study.

1.4 Research Question

What pattern of parent-reported emotional, behavioural, attentional, peer-related, and prosocial scores is observed among the five eligible children with ASD?

1.5 Significance and Scope

The study highlights the importance of examining different areas of emotional and behavioural functioning in children with ASD. It also demonstrates the use of a structured screening instrument to organise parent-reported information.

The study is limited to five eligible records of children aged 4–10 years. It uses a descriptive approach and does not include a comparison group, longitudinal follow-up, or intervention evaluation.

2. Review of Literature

Research indicates that children with ASD may experience emotional and behavioural concerns alongside their developmental differences. Chandler et al. (2016) examined emotional and behavioural problems in young children with ASD, highlighting the relevance of assessing co-occurring concerns.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire developed by Goodman (1997) provides a structured method for assessing five areas: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour. Stone et al. (2010) reviewed the psychometric properties of parent and teacher versions of the SDQ for children aged 4–12 years.

Parent reports are useful because caregivers observe children in everyday situations. However, behaviour may differ across home, school, and other environments. Palmer et al. (2023) examined parent, teacher, and observational reports of emotional and behavioural problems in young autistic children, demonstrating the relevance of considering different sources of information.

Peer relationships are another important aspect of children's development. Wang et al. (2024) examined peer relationships in autistic and non-autistic youths, highlighting the relationship between social functioning and emotional and behavioural characteristics.

Family and environmental factors may also influence children's functioning. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory explains development in relation to interacting environmental systems. Yorke et al. (2018) reviewed associations between emotional and behavioural problems in children with ASD and psychological distress among their parents.

Overall, the literature supports examining emotional, behavioural, attentional, and peer-related concerns through structured assessment. It also emphasises that screening results should be interpreted alongside developmental history, observations, and contextual information.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional research design to describe parent-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties among children with ASD.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Seven participant records were initially available. Five records met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final analysis. The sample consisted of three boys and two girls aged between 4 and 10 years.
Purposive sampling was used to select records based on documented ASD status, age, and availability of SDQ scores.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:
- Documented diagnosis of ASD.
- Age between 4 and 10 years.
- Availability of relevant parent-reported SDQ scores.

Exclusion criteria:
- Age outside the specified range.
- Absence of a documented ASD diagnosis.
- Insufficient SDQ information.

Two records were excluded: one because the child was below the study age range and another because ASD was not documented.

3.4 Research Instrument

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), developed by Goodman (1997), was used to assess parent-reported emotional and behavioural functioning.
The five domains are:
1) Emotional symptoms.
2) Conduct problems.
3) Hyperactivity/inattention.
4) Peer problems.
5) Prosocial behaviour.

The first four domains are combined to calculate the total difficulties score. Prosocial behaviour is scored separately. The SDQ is a screening instrument and does not independently establish a diagnosis.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Eligible records were screened according to the study criteria. Participant identification codes were used to maintain confidentiality. The SDQ scores were organised and checked for consistency.

Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, sample standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum, were calculated. No inferential statistical tests were performed.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participant confidentiality was maintained through identification codes. Parent-reported information was used for academic purposes, and consent and relevant permission documentation were maintained as part of the study records. No ethics committee approval number or date is reported in this manuscript because these details were not specified.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Participant Characteristics

The final sample consisted of five children aged 4–10 years. Three participants were boys (60%) and two were girls (40%). The mean age was 7 years.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Total participants	5	100%
Boys	3	60%
Girls	2	40%

4.2 Individual Participant Scores

Table 2: Individual SDQ Scores

Code	Age	Sex	Emotional	Conduct	Hyperactivity	Peer	Total	Prosocial
C01	10	Male	7	4	8	7	26	5
C02	5	Male	6	2	9	8	25	7
C04	7	Male	5	2	8	10	25	1
C06	4	Female	4	2	5	7	18	6
C07	9	Female	6	2	6	9	23	3

Note. Total difficulties is the sum of the four difficulty subscales. Prosocial behaviour is reported separately.

4.3 Descriptive Statistical Results

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of SDQ Scores

SDQ Domain	Mean	SD	Median	Range
Emotional symptoms	5.6	1.14	6	4–7
Conduct problems	2.4	0.89	2	2–4
Hyperactivity/inattention	7.2	1.64	8	5–9
Peer problems	8.2	1.3	8	7–10
Total difficulties	23.4	3.21	25	18–26
Prosocial behaviour	4.4	2.41	5	1–7

Note. n = 5; SD = sample standard deviation

4.4 Interpretation of Findings

The mean emotional symptoms score was 5.60, indicating variation in parent-reported emotional concerns across participants. Conduct problems had a mean of 2.40, with relatively limited variation.

Hyperactivity/inattention had a mean score of 7.20 and was the second-highest difficulty domain. This suggests that attention and activity-related concerns were relevant in several included records. However, SDQ scores alone cannot establish ADHD. Peer problems recorded the highest mean among the four difficulty domains (M = 8.20, SD = 1.30). This indicates that peer-related concerns were prominent within the included records. However, this result cannot be generalised to all children with ASD.

The mean total difficulties score was 23.40, while prosocial behaviour had a mean of 4.40. Prosocial behaviour varied across participants and was considered separately from the difficulty domains.

4.5 Discussion

The findings demonstrate variation in parent-reported emotional and behavioural scores among the five included children. Peer problems had the highest mean among the four difficulty domains, followed by hyperactivity/inattention.

These observations are relevant to the literature examining emotional and behavioural concerns in children with ASD (Chandler et al., 2016). The findings also support the importance of using structured screening instruments such as the SDQ (Goodman, 1997).

Parent reports provide information about everyday functioning, but they may not represent behaviour across all settings. As highlighted by Palmer et al. (2023), different informants and observations can contribute additional information.

Peer-related difficulties may be influenced by communication differences, social opportunities, and environmental expectations. The current findings provide a descriptive indication of peer-related concerns within the five records, not evidence of a universal pattern.

Overall, the results emphasise the importance of considering emotional, behavioural, attentional, peer-related, and prosocial domains together. The small sample size requires cautious interpretation.

5. Summary, Limitations and Conclusion

5.1 Summary

The study examined parent-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties among five eligible children with ASD using the SDQ. A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional design was adopted. The participants were aged 4–10 years and included three boys and two girls.

The results showed that peer problems had the highest mean score among the four difficulty domains (M = 8.20), followed

by hyperactivity/inattention (M = 7.20). The mean emotional symptoms score was 5.60, conduct problems was 2.40, total difficulties was 23.40, and prosocial behaviour was 4.40.

5.2 Limitations

The study had the following limitations:

1) The sample included only five participants.
2) Purposive sampling limits generalisability.
3) Data were based only on parent reports.
4) The cross-sectional design did not examine changes over time.
5) No comparison group was included.
6) Only descriptive statistical analysis was performed.
7) The SDQ is a screening instrument and cannot independently establish diagnoses.

5.3 Recommendations

Future studies should include larger samples and, where feasible, information from parents, teachers, and direct observations. Researchers should also consider developmental characteristics, family context, and educational environments when interpreting children's emotional and behavioural functioning.

Clinicians and educators should use screening results alongside comprehensive assessment and individual developmental information. Support should consider children's strengths as well as their difficulties.

5.4 Conclusion

The present study described parent-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties among five eligible children with ASD using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Peer problems had the highest mean score among the four difficulty domains, followed by hyperactivity/inattention. Variation was also observed in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, total difficulties, and prosocial behaviour.

The findings highlight the importance of examining multiple areas of functioning when understanding the needs of children with ASD. However, because of the small sample size and reliance on parent-reported data, the findings are limited to the included records and cannot be generalised to the wider ASD population.

References

[1] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

[2] Chandler, S., Howlin, P., Simonoff, E., O'Sullivan, T., Tseng, E., Kennedy, J., Charman, T., & Baird, G. (2016). Emotional and behavioural problems in young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology, 58*(2), 202–208. https://doi.org/10.1111/dmcn.12830

[3] Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 38*(5), 581–586. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1997.tb01545.x

[4] Palmer, M., Tarver, J., Carter Leno, V., Paris Perez, J., Frayne, M., Slonims, V., Pickles, A., Scott, S., Charman, T., & Simonoff, E. (2023). Parent, teacher and observational reports of emotional and behavioral problems in young autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 53*(1), 296–309. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05421-x

[5] Stone, L. L., Otten, R., Engels, R. C. M. E., Vermulst, A. A., & Janssens, J. M. A. M. (2010). Psychometric properties of the parent and teacher versions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire for 4- to 12-year-olds: A review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 13*(3), 254–274. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-010-0071-2