Socio-emotional problems in 3-year old children – ASQ:SE used in a population-based study

Background:
Mental health is a public health challenge also among children. Increased knowledge will guide evidence-based health-promoting interventions and early identification for adequate parental support. The aim of this study was to describe mental health in terms of socio-emotional problems among 3-year-old boys and girls and relate this to family characteristics and urban or rural living area.

Within Child Health Care (CHC) in Västerbotten (Sweden) the 3-year-olds’ health check-up includes parent-rating of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE). Total score 0-465 where high values indicate socio-emotional problems, and the suggested cut-off 59 was used. Cross-sectional descriptive and comparative analyses were performed.

Method:
ASQ:SE for the years 2014-2017 for 7179 3-year-olds (boys 3719 & girls 3460), response rate 70%. Most children lived with both parents (92%), had siblings (75%), and lived in urban areas (69%). Boys scored higher (mean 31, SD 25) than girls (mean 24, SD 21). Out of all children 9% scored above the cut-off, boys 12% and girls 6% (p<0.000). Problems were more common in single-parent and one-child families (both p<0.000), while no difference was found between the urban and rural areas.

Results:
Most 3-year-olds had a good parental reported socio-emotional health. However, problems were reported for about every 10th child, twice so for boys compared to girls, and more often in single-parent and single child families. Thus, already in pre-school age socio-emotional problems should be given attention, preferably by a systematic strategy.

Discussion:
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