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Self-harm, Substance Abuse and Age: Relatedness to Sexually Abusive Behaviors Toward Others by Juveniles

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Introduction

The present study analyzes three factors as they relate to functioning: self-harm, substance abuse and age. Research has shown girls highest in mid-adolescent self-harm are those who engage in high levels of bullying (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008). Little research has been done to analyze specific behaviors toward others among adolescents who self-harm.

Dembo, la Voie, Schmeidler, & Washburn (1987) found a positive correlation between antisocial orientation and illicit drug use. Further research was done to understand the nature of behaviors and functioning of juveniles who abuse substances. Johnson (1988) found a history of substance abuse in the majority of families of children who engaged in sexually abusive behaviors. Juvenile substance abuse may also be correlated with children who engage in sexually abusive behaviors.

Previous research suggests age may be a factor in functioning. In a study on bullying, aggressive victims became less prevalent and passive victims and bullies became more prevalent with age (Hanish, & Guerra, 2004). Additionally, inappropriate sexual behaviors may decrease with age. Sexual harassment of same- and opposite-sex peers has been shown to increase over early adolescent years and level off in later high-school years (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster, & Jiang, 2006).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the relation among self-harm, substance abuse and age as they relate to functioning. Specifically, juveniles' sexually abusive behaviors toward others and behaviors toward others at 12 months were analyzed.

Method

Participants:

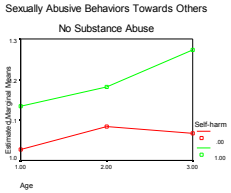
Participants in this study were juveniles meeting the criteria for serious emotional disturbance and required multi-agency involvement. These juveniles range in ages from 10.76 to 19.98 years. There were 283 males and 139 females with a mean age of 14.437 years (SD = 1.964). The 4majority of the participants were identified as non-Hispanic White (83.5%), while all other ethnicities were categorized as "any other ethnicity" (16.5%). Univariate statistics are presented in Table 1.

Measures:

The Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scales (CAFAS; Hodges, 2005) is a rating scale which assesses a youth's degree of impairment in day-to-day functioning due to emotional, behavioral, psychological, psychiatric or substance abuse problems.

Procedures:

The CAFAS was completed for each child every six months, beginning at intake. The CAFAS was administered by staff trained by qualified trainers in the use of the CAFAS. All staff received acceptable reliability ratings.



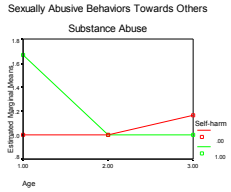
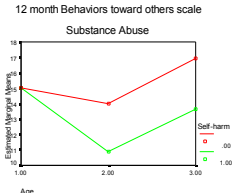


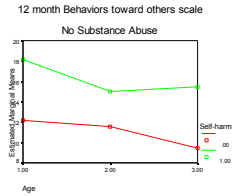
Table 1. *Sexually Abusive Behaviors Toward Others*

Substance Abuse	Age	Mean	SD	N
No Self-harm				
No Substance Abuse	1	1.027	.164	37
	2	1.083	.282	24
	3	1.067	.258	15
	Total	1.053	.225	76
Substance Abuse	1	1.000	.	1
	2	1.000	.000	13
	3	1.167	.389	12
	Total	1.077	.272	26
Self-harm				
No Substance Abuse	1	1.133	.352	15
	2	1.182	.405	11
	3	1.273	.467	11
	Total	1.189	.397	37
Substance Abuse	1	1.667	.577	3
	2	1.000	.000	8
	3	1.000	.000	11
	Total	1.090	.294	22

Table 2. *Behaviors Toward Others at 12 Months*

Substance Abuse	Age	Mean	SD	N
No Self-harm				
No Substance Abuse	1	12.195	7.910	41
	2	11.539	9.672	26
	3	9.444	6.391	18
	Total	11.412	8.187	85
Substance Abuse	1	15.000	7.071	2
	2	14.000	7.368	15
	3	16.923	7.511	13
	Total	15.333	7.303	30
Self-harm				
No Substance Abuse	1	18.125	10.468	16
	2	15.000	9.405	14
	3	15.455	8.202	11
	Total	16.342	9.422	41
Substance Abuse	1	15.000	12.910	4
	2	10.909	11.362	11
	3	13.636	9.244	11
	Total	12.692	10.414	26





Results

To examine how self-harm, substance abuse and age relate with juveniles' sexually abusive behaviors toward others, between groups ANOVAS were performed with follow-up analyses using the LSD procedure (p = .05).

There was a significant three-way interaction among self-harm, substance abuse and age as they relate to sexually abusive behaviors toward others ($F(2,149) = 3.275$, $p = .041$, $Mse = .078$, $r = .21$). Follow-up analyses (LSDmmd = .213) revealed for participants who do not abuse substances, across all age groups there was no significant difference in sexually abusive behaviors toward others between those who self-harm and those who do not self-harm. For those who self-harm and for those who do not self-harm, there was no difference in sexually abusive behaviors toward others among the three age groups.

Among juveniles who abuse substances, for those in age group 1 (10.76-13.47 years), those who self-harm demonstrated more sexually abusive behaviors toward others than participants who do not self-harm. For age groups 2 (13.47-15.32 years) and 3 (15.32-19.98 years), there was no significant difference in sexually abusive behaviors toward others between those who self-harm and those who do not self-harm. For participants who do not self-harm, sexually abusive behaviors toward others were statistically equivalent for all age groups. For juveniles who self-harm, those in age group 1 engaged in more sexually abusive behaviors toward others than those in age group 3, and those in age group 1 demonstrated more sexually abusive behaviors than those in age group 2. However, sexually abusive behaviors toward others were statistically equivalent for age groups 2 and 3.

There was a significant main effect of self-harm as related to sexually abusive behaviors toward others ($F(1,149) = 5.080$, $p = .026$, $Mse = .078$, $r = .18$), such that those who self-harm engaged in more sexually abusive behaviors toward others than those who do not self-harm. This was not descriptive of the entire design. Among those who do not abuse substances, juveniles presented with similar levels of sexually abusive behaviors toward others regardless of self-harm. Additionally, there was no difference in sexually abusive behaviors toward others for youth in age group 2 between those who self-harm and those who do not self-harm.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine how self-harm, substance abuse and age relate to three aspects of functioning: sexually abusive behaviors toward others, behaviors toward others at 12 months and overall functioning. For sexually abusive behaviors toward others, the results show young juveniles who abuse substances engage in more sexually abusive behaviors if they self-harm. For participants in older age groups, sexually abusive behaviors were the same, regardless of self-harm. This suggests among young juveniles who abuse substances, self-harm is a good predictor of sexually abusive behavior toward others.

Regarding behaviors toward others at 12 months, the data shows for juveniles who do not abuse substances, those who self-harm displayed more problem behaviors toward others at 12 months. There was no effect of self-harm for juveniles who do abuse substances, suggesting self-harm is a good predictor of behaviors toward others at 12 months in juveniles who do not abuse substances. Additionally, Juveniles who do not self-harm displayed more behaviors toward others at 12 months if they abuse substances, whereas those who self-harm engaged in more behaviors toward others at 12 months if they do not abuse substances.

Limitations of this study include initial and ongoing equivalence, as well as small sample size for some conditions. Future research should attempt to increase power by having more adequate sample sizes for each condition.

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