

# Psychological and Behavioural Problems and Empathic Abilities in 8-12 Year-Old Children

## Executive Summary:

A large number of studies have been undertaken to examine violence in educational establishments. Prospective and retrospective studies often describe violence as a phenomenon that is a consequence of unresolved psychological and/or behavioural problems, usually stemming from early childhood. These studies point out that the phenomenon of violence throughout adolescence cannot be studied without first examining the causes and history of this violence, and, in particular, the occurrence of externalized behaviours (such as conduct disorders, opposite troubles).

The main goal of this study was to evaluate the potential of entrusting children with the task of identifying the psychological and behavioural difficulties that they encounter, in order to set up preventive interventions. To complete this mission, we thought it was essential to gain a better understanding of aspects of their empathic abilities, as they play a preventive role against aggressive and hostile behaviours. (A good sense of empathy during childhood predicts less severity and less stability of externalized later).

Thus, in our study, the following two questions are addressed:

- (1) Are children able to perceive and identify their psychological and behavioural problems?
- (2) Do children have empathic abilities?

In order to answer, we observed the personal profiles of children from 8-12 years of age ( $M=9.3$  years;  $SD= 1.1$ ). Subjects were boys (52%) and girls (48%) from the Grenoble school system. Two tests were used: The Youth Self-Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (C13CL, Achenbach, 1991) and the Bryant Empathy Scale (Bryant, 1982). All the forms were completed by the children themselves.

The main results of this study provided information on children's present perception of their own psychological and behavioural difficulties and their present state of awareness of their own feelings and emotional well-being. Children were not free of clinical distress. Given the high level of psychological difficulties experienced by the children who participated in this research, our findings suggest that this situation warrants much greater attention. In particular, children need to deserve more support from adults who can recognize the problems that are affecting them, and initiate preventative and supportive measures.

We also identified some sex differences in children's experiences. As expected, boys presented more externalized problems than girls; on the opposite girls reported more problems with depression and some internalized difficulties than boys. This prevalence of externalized problems in boys and

internalized difficulties in girls is consistent with literature. Nevertheless we have to highlight one of the most interesting result : a higher than expected number of internalized difficulties experienced by boys. We think this is an essential finding to communicate to parents because it is important for them to become more aware of potential differences in the difficulties encountered by boys and girls as they adapt their parenting approaches to accommodate their children's unique needs.

A second result of this study was that it allowed us to find out more about the empathic abilities of children, almost that girls are more empathic than boys. Children's empathy diminishes when they grow up. Moreover empathy was correlated, in our results, with anxiety, depression, and internalized difficulties.

To conclude, these results suggest that it could be useful to reinforce children's' abilities to identify their own psychological experiences, in order to help them participate in a positive way in their development and wellbeing. Training might permit an improvement in the cognitive capacity and evaluative aptitude of boys and girls. Similarly, the training could reinforce their acceptance of others' differences, including differing emotional and behavioural reactions to events.

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