

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS AMONG CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLIC PARENTS¹

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Summary.—Studies show that children of alcoholics constitute a population at-risk commonly for poor performance, skipping school days, and school drop out. The focus of the present study was to examine a variety of direct outcome variables measuring academic performance among a sample of 226 children, 108 of them from parents who misused alcohol in Cadiz. Parents were outpatients of a Health Service and received treatment for the drinking problem; 118 students were children of nonalcoholic parents attending the same schools as the children of alcoholic parents. Both groups were compared on age, sex, school grade, and social environment. The study identified five variables on which performance by children of alcoholic parents was poorer: intelligence, repeating a grade, low academic performance, skipping school days, and dropping out of school.

Poor school performance involves not achieving the minimum demands of the educational system. These demands, although constant in the educational plans of the time, surface as a reality to which we should pay attention only when schooling is mandatory, and it is observed that there are a large number of children who do not achieve the required minimum.

Analyzing the origin of the poor school performance, Monedero (1984) stated that causes can frequently be reduced to the presence of perturbations in affective-emotional adjustment. From a more specific perspective, Portelano (1989) considered learning problems as the result of the individual variables of the students with implication of the environment in a disparity between the child's learning potential and his school performance. More recently, Kaplan, Sadock, and Grebb (1996) stated that psychosocial adjustment plays a significant role in school performance.

One of the first difficulties that often reverberate in poor school performance is conflict between parents (Seilhamer & Jacob, 1990). Teachers very frequently observe that, when family conflicts occur, academic performance is lower and school motivation decreases (Baer, Novick, & Hummen-Schluger, 1995). Poor school performance among children of alcoholic parents also appears, even if the alcoholic does not recognize his illness, does not receive or accept treatment, and has periods of sudden relapse (Sher, Walitzer, Wood, & Brent, 1991). Conflicts arise in the family that the child is not able to assimilate. These conflicts turn into emotional problems and reduce

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the child's self-esteem. If these circumstances persist through sensitive development periods such as adolescence, poor school performance will probably grow worse (Weintraub, 1991; Havey & Dodd, 1995; Aragón, Bragado, & Carrasco, 1997). A study by Hyphantis, Koutras, Liakos, and Marselos (1991) with college students whose parents were alcoholics indicated that students' academic performance throughout their university courses was significantly poorer for them.

Gonzalez-Marin's study (1988) with children of alcoholic parents showed a high incidence of school failure. Sex differences were analyzed, and boys showed a lower school performance than girls, although this sex difference was not replicated in studies by other researchers. Sher, *et al.* (1991) analyzed academic work for a sample of 500 young men and women, all of them members of families in which at least one of the parents was alcoholic, and found no significant academic performance differences related to students' sex.

Confronted with these variable results and samples, our main target was to evaluate different academic and social indicators of poor school performance in a group of children with actively alcoholic parents and to compare these data with those of children of nonalcoholic families. We identified four variables related to school adjustment: academic performance, repeating a grade, skipping school days, and dropping out of school. These parameters together were identified as "school failure."

The assessment of the influence that active parental alcoholism has on students' academic performance may help identify the risk factors in living with alcoholic parents. This knowledge could make treatment programs more efficient for this population at high risk for social malfunctioning and poor school performance.

METHOD

Subjects

A sample of 226 children from the Cadiz, Spain, school district participated. The students were divided into two groups, a control group of 118 students and a group of 108 with alcoholic parents. The latter was made up of children of alcoholic parents coming from a Health Service in Cadiz and included 55 boys and 53 girls, with ages of 7 to 16 years. Alcoholism was diagnosed following the DSM-IV criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The control group of children of nonalcoholic parents were 53 boys and 65 girls whose ages ranged from 7 to 16 years. Students were selected from children attending either public or private schools at the same sites as the subjects with alcoholic parents. Both groups were balanced for age, sex, school grade, and social environment.

Materials

We administered the Specific Questionnaire of Social-Demographic and School Data (validity and reliability by Casas, 1999) to the parents and teachers of both groups. The parents of the children in the control group also took the Spanish version of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Martinez-Delgado, 1996).

All children in both groups were given the Raven Progressive Matrix Intelligence Test (Raven, Court, & Raven, 1993) to filter students with percentiles lower than 25 because such low scores alone could account for poor school performance.

As well as standard sociodemographic variables, the Specific Questionnaire of Social-Demographic and School Data registered some indicators that seemed to have a direct relation with school failure, such as (a) the number of times a student repeated a grade, (b) the number of skipped school days, and (c) academic performance.

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test was administered only to the parents of the children of nonalcoholic families (control group) as this test has been shown to be valid in the detection of drinking problems. It was selected for the control group to detect possible noncontrolled alcoholic parents.

Procedure

In February 1998 we contacted all the outpatients of the Health Service that shared the criteria established for this investigation: (1) an alcohol abstinence period of less than two years and (2) school children of ages between 7 and 16 years old. A group of alcoholic parents was thus selected. Their children constituted the group with alcoholic parents. Afterwards, we established contact with the principals of the schools where those children were registered and selected individuals at random for the control group from the same grades. Parents of the children in the control group were also informed about the study in which their children were going to take part and were asked to collaborate by filling out the Specific Questionnaire of Social-Demographic and School Data and the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test, allowing us to screen for possible noncontrolled alcoholic parents in the control group. Test administration was done individually by appropriately trained professionals.

For this study, we have used the word "school failure" in the broad sense of the term, considering individuals to show school failure when they obtained scores higher than 25 on the Raven test, yet matched three variables: (1) repeating a grade, (2) obtaining an average grade lower than 5 points (under 50% of the academic performance required), and (3) being over 10 years of age.

RESULTS

The general intelligence values in both groups are analogous. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the score percentiles of the children with alcoholic parents and the control groups on Raven's Progressive Matrices. The mean for the group with alcoholic parents was 38.33 ($SD=9.64$), while the mean for the control group was 37.64 ($SD=8.37$). Differences between groups were not significant (Mean differences = 3.7, ns).

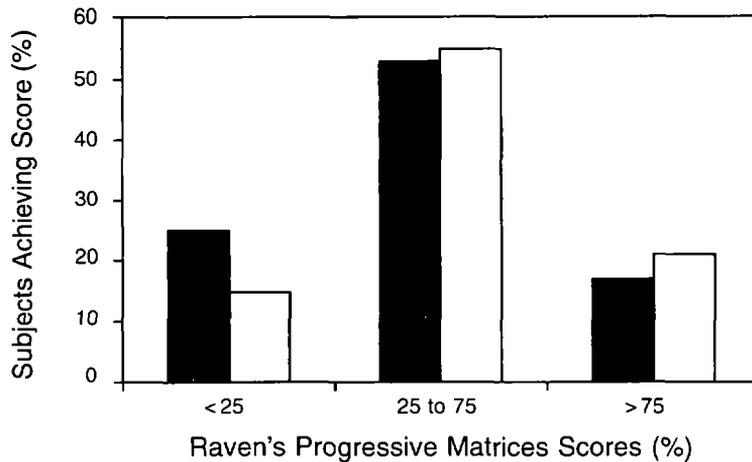


FIG. 1. Percentage of subjects achieving scores on Raven's Progressive Matrices for Group With Alcoholic Parents (■, $M=38.33$, $SD=9.64$) and Control Group (□, $M=37.64$, $SD=8.37$); $M_{diff}=3.7$, ns.

One of the indicators of school failure was the number of school grades repeated, as shown in Table 1. Children of alcoholic parents show a higher rate of repeating grades at school (29.6%) than control group children of the same age and same environment (14.4%). There are significant differences in distributions of the two groups ($\chi^2=5.48$, $p<.001$). The children with alcoholic parents were more likely to repeat grades. In our work, no child in the control group has repeated the same course twice, yet 5.6% of the children in the other group have done so ($\chi^2=4.86$, $p<.003$).

Skipped school days, i.e., the days children do not attend school without a justified excuse, may also be considered an indirect measure of a child's motivation for learning. Table 2 shows the distribution of skipped school days for the two groups. Differences between groups were not statistically significant ($\chi^2=2.39$, ns).

Data related to academic performance were obtained for the students' academic years of 1997–1998 and 1998–1999. The average of the academic

TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF SUBJECTS WITH SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC GRADES, UNSUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC YEARS, AND SKIPPED SCHOOL DAYS FOR GROUP WITH ALCOHOLIC PARENTS AND CONTROL GROUP

Measure	Group With Alcoholic Parents		Control Group		χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Unsuccessful grades	32	29.6	17	16.1		
Successful grades	76	70.4	101	85.6	5.48	<.001
1 Unsuccessful academic year	26	24.1	17	14.4		
2 Unsuccessful academic years	6	5.6	0	0.0	4.86	<.003
4-6 skipped days/mo.	7	6.5	4	3.4		
>7 skipped days/mo.	3	2.8	0	0.0	2.39	ns

grades was calculated according to a standard scale from 0 to 10 in linear values. The mean grade ($M=6.40$) of the students of nonalcoholic parents is 0.75 points above the average grade of children of alcoholic parents ($M=5.65$). This indicates statistically significant distributions of the two groups ($\chi^2=12.2$, $p<.001$).

Finally, some results were related to indicators of school failure for both groups. As shown above, school failure was attributed to those students who met three criteria: (1) having repeated a grade, (2) obtaining an average grade lower than 5 points (under 50% of the academic performance required), and (3) being over 10 years of age. Table 2 shows frequencies and percentages of students who failed at school. The school failure rate is 22.22% for the group with alcoholic parents and 9.32% for the control group. Group distributions were statistically significantly different ($\chi^2=6.49$, $p<.01$; *Odds Ratio*=2.83, $p<.05$). These values indicate that a child of alcoholic parents is nearly three times more likely to show school failure than a child from a nonalcoholic family.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGES, MEANS, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF ACHIEVEMENT, UNDERACHIEVEMENT, AND SCHOOL FAILURE FOR GROUP WITH ALCOHOLIC PARENTS AND CONTROL GROUP

Group	Achievement		Underachievement		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
With Alcoholic Parents	75	79.4	33	30.6	5.65*	1.40
Control	101	85.6	17	14.4	6.40	1.50
$\chi^2=12.22$						
		School Failure		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
		<i>n</i>	%			
With Alcoholic Parents		24	11.00	13.80*	1.63	
Control		11	9.32	14.45	1.36	
$\chi^2=6.49$						

* $p<.01$.

DISCUSSION

This study confirmed the findings of other studies showing that parental alcoholism constitutes a risk for their children for poor academic performance (Chandy, Harris, Blum, & Resnick, 1993a, 1993b). Such children scored significantly lower on all school performance measures than children in a control group. The key factors that significantly differentiated the two groups were number of school grades repeated, academic performance, and skipped school days.

However, the intelligence test score distributions were similar for children of alcoholic and nonalcoholic parents, using the Raven's Progressive Matrices. This children's test was used to exclude students with low IQ scores because low IQ scores alone could account for poor school performance. While the mean IQ score differences between the two groups were not statistically significant, the results agree with other research reports showing a tendency for children of alcoholic parents to have lower scores on IQ tests (Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1988; Tarter, Jacob, & Laird, 1993; Aragon, *et al.*, 1997).

Thirty-two children (29.6% of the group with alcoholic parents) repeated a grade, compared to 17 children (14.4%) in the control group with nonalcoholic parents. Of the former group, 5.6% repeated two or more grades, but no children of nonalcoholic parents repeated two or more grades. The possibility of students repeating a grade several times has not been considered in previous research (Varon, 1993), although it is an important aspect in prediction of school failure.

When academic performance was assessed, significant differences between the two groups were found. The mean academic performance score for children of alcoholic parents was .75 points lower than that of children of nonalcoholic parents on a scale of 0 to 10. These scores again indicate poorer school performance among children of actively alcoholic parents. These results match the results of Perez and Vicente (1992), Chica (1993), and Lopez (1993).

Parental alcoholism is an important predictor of poor academic performance by children. It also predicts an earlier risk of dropping out of school and a shorter school career (Chandy, *et al.*, 1993b). Other authors suggest that rather than directly lowering academic performance, parental alcoholism is primarily a risk factor in poor behavioral adjustment (García-Prieto, Bobes, Bousono, Cervera, & Lemos, 1986; Murphy, O'Farrell, Floyd, & Connors, 1991).

School failure parameters are very different and depend on educational context. Considering the social context where this work was carried out, academic performance, skipping school days, and number of school courses repeated are all significant predictors of the children's school adjustment.

Some of these factors are higher for children of alcoholic parents (see Tables 1 and 2). However, more research is required to understand the predictors of low school performance and to evaluate their prevalence in this population. Such research expresses a "vision of school as a dynamic force in enhancing the life changes of school-age children whose personal circumstances may increase their risk for school drop out or low achievement, in an era that increasingly demands higher education and specialized skills" (Chandy, *et al.*, 1993b, p. 517).

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