

Counseling Elementary School Aged Children of Alcoholics: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The author reviewed the professional literature concerning elementary school aged children of alcoholics (ECOA). This literature suggests that ECOAs encounter problems with cognitive, behavioral, and familial functioning. The implications of ECOA research for counseling practice were discussed.

Introduction

Within the past few years, professional school and mental health counselors have begun to focus specifically on elementary school aged children of alcoholics (ECOA) as a group at high risk for academic and social problems. This article will review the research literature on ECOAs. In addition, this work will discuss the practical implications of the research findings for professional counselors.

Research

There are an estimated 6.6 million children under aged 18 with an alcoholic parent (Johnson & Bennett, 1988). In other words, four to six children in every elementary school classroom are actively dealing with issues surrounding a parent's alcoholism (Brake, 1988). Research on this population suggests ECOAs encounter problems in cognition, conduct, and family life.

Cognitive Functioning

The largest number of ECOA studies that appear in the professional literature focus on cognition. A leading researcher in this area is University of Pittsburgh scholar Ralph Tarter. In a study on the sons of early onset alcoholics, Tarter and his research team found specific cognitive impairments. This group of male children manifested impairments on tests measuring verbal ability and attention (Tarter, Jacob, &

Bremer, 1989). Tarter holds that these deficits are the result of a dysfunction of the neural systems lying along the front brain neuraxis. Tarter goes on to state that the behavioral consequences of this dysfunction are impulsivity, disinhibition, and impersistence; behaviors that Tarter notes have been implicated as factors in a vulnerability to alcoholism.

Hill, Steinhauer, and Zubin (1990) also found neuropsychological deficits in ECOAs. These three researchers compared male and female ECOAs with male and female children of controls using two auditory paradigms to elicit event-related potentials (ERPs). This study found greater anterior negativity in ECOAs. This greater anterior negativity means that ECOAs experience delays in processing stimuli. Hill, Steinhauer, and Zubin hypothesize that this greater anterior negativity is an electrocortical sign of maturational lag. These three went on to state that this lag probably exists because ECOAs suffer a large number of insults to the central nervous system; insults often encountered when living in a dysfunctional family atmosphere. Typical aspects of this atmosphere include poor nutrition, physical abuse, and psychological impoverishment.

Bennett, Wolin, and Reiss (1988) also found significant ability and achievement deficits among ECOAs. In their study, ECOAs score lower than controls on four variables: Full Scale IQ, Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT) reading scores, PIAT arithmetic scores, and PIAT spelling scores. Given these results, Bennett, Wolin and Reiss con-

clude that "alcoholic families are generally less successful in establishing a well-planned, stable, and meaningful family-ritual life than are nonalcoholic families and that lack of such a family environment is reflected in more problems among the children" (p. 189). While many studies find cognitive deficits among ECOAs, the literature is not unequivocal about this question.

Johnson and Rolf (1988a) found no significant differences between ECOAs and controls on Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale IQ scores. However, these two caution that their nonsignificant findings may be the result of their sampling:

The present study's restriction of families to those with recovering alcoholics also helped to diminish the likelihood of family conflict-induced intellectual and achievement problems. The data from the current study might simply reflect the effect that parental abstinence has on children's cognitive performance. (p. 855)

While Johnson and Rolf did not find significant cognitive differences, they did find significant differences in perceptions of cognitive ability. Johnson and Rolf (1988b) found that the maternal and self-perceptions of ECOAs are lower than the perceptions of the controls. The two researchers theorize that these perceptions emerge out of an experience of helplessness. A helplessness generated from living in a chaotic family situation.

Behavioral Functioning

University of South Carolina scholars Melissa West and Ronald Prinz published an excellent meta-analysis of the literature on parental alcoholism and childhood psychopathology (1987). The two report that the literature supports the contention that parental alcoholism is associated with a heightened incidence of symptoms of child psychopathology; symptoms such as hyperactivity, conduct disorders, substance abuse, delinquency, somatic problems, and depression. However, while the research findings in this area are overwhelming, West and Prinz urge interpretive caution. These two believe the research in this area contains methodological flaws that in turn can hide the true clinical picture. For instance, West and Prinz suggest that the following can con-

found an independent variable such as parental alcoholism: (a) causality issues, (b) child resiliency, and (c) variations in family disruption.

Besides the psychological research noted above, research from psychiatry also contains valuable information for the professional counselor. This research concerns the biological etiology of behavioral dysfunction in ECOAs. Of particular value is the research conducted under the direction of Washington University psychiatrist Robert Cloninger. This research seeks to build a unified framework upon which to consider all issues related to alcoholism and behavioral dysfunction.

Cloninger's research on alcoholism typologies may hold the key to understanding the genesis of emotive and conduct issues in ECOAs. In his research, Cloninger found that alcoholics are a heterogeneous group. Specifically, Cloninger discovered two forms of alcoholism that he labels Type I and Type II (Cloninger, Bohman, & Sigvardsson, 1981).

Type I alcoholism generally occurs after aged 25 in persons described as anxious, pessimistic, and withdrawn. Most alcoholic men and women fall into this type. In longitudinal studies of Swedish adoptees, Cloninger found that genetic heritage is not a significant factor in the development of this type. Therefore, he described Type I as milieu-limited alcoholism (Cloninger, 1987b).

The onset of Type II alcoholism generally occurs before aged 25. This type of alcoholism is associated with frequent impulsive-aggressive behaviors such as fighting or reckless driving (Cloninger, Sigvardsson, & Bohman, 1988). Cloninger found this type restricted to men and thus labels it male-limited alcoholism (Cloninger, 1987b).

In the Swedish adoptee studies, Cloninger found that Type II abuse was "highly heritable from fathers to sons and fairly independent of postnatal stress" (Sigvardsson, Cloninger, & Bohman, 1985, p. 185). Given these findings, Cloninger began to wonder if certain emotive and behavioral patterns were genetically based. Using descriptive, genetic, neuropsychopharmacological, and ethological data from the Swedish studies, Cloninger formed his biosocial theory of personality. He hypothesized "that there are three dimensions of personality that are genetically independent which have predictable

patterns of interaction in their adaptive responses to novel, aversive, and appetitive stimuli" (Sigvardsson, Bohman, & Cloninger, 1987, p. 931).

Cloninger postulates that these three independent, genetically based personality dimensions are: (a) Novelty Seeking, (b) Harm-Avoidance, and (c) Reward-Dependence (Cloninger, 1994; Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993). Cloninger sees Novelty Seeking as "a heritable tendency toward frequent exploratory activity and intense exhilaration in response to novel or appetitive stimuli" (Cloninger, 1987b, p. 413). This tendency is seen as a precipitate of a genetic variation that results in a low basal dopamine firing rate.

Cloninger theorizes that Harm-Avoidance behavior is the result of a genetic variation in serotonergic activity. Cloninger posits that higher than average serotonergic activity produces Harm Avoidance activity. Cloninger defines this activity as "a heritable tendency to respond adversely to aversive stimuli and their conditioned signals" (Cloninger, 1987b, p. 414).

Cloninger's third dimension is Reward Dependence. Cloninger hypothesizes that this dimension involves "a genetic variation in behavioral maintenance or resistance to extinction of previously rewarded behavior" (Cloninger, 1987b, p. 414). Cloninger believes that high Reward-Dependence behavior is the result of lower basal noradrenergic activity.

In a variety of research projects employing both observational and psychometric methodologies, Cloninger (1987a) consistently finds these three independent factors among subjects of all ages. Other studies using Cloninger's psychometric instrument with American college students (Nixon & Parsons, 1989) and Czechs (Kozeny, Kubicka, & Prochazkova, 1989) have also replicated the Washington University professor's findings.

Using these dimensions, Cloninger finds he can predict both substance abuse (Cloninger, Sigvardsson, & Bohman, 1988) and social adjustment problems (Sigvardsson, Bohman, & Cloninger, 1987) in subjects from the Swedish adoptee studies. Cloninger believes that at-risk potentials in children are the result of certain combinations of the three variables. For instance, Cloninger and his research

team found that children who became alcoholic in adolescence possess the classic Type II combination at aged 11 (Sigvardsson, Bohman, & Cloninger, 1987). Earls, Reich, Jung, and Cloninger (1988) found a correlation between ADHD and parental alcoholism in their research. However, their study does not differentiate between Type I and Type II alcoholic parents.

Familial Functioning

Working from a family systems perspective, social worker Claudia Black (1982) has developed a social role typology of ECOAs. This typology is very popular and influential. Black believes that these roles grow out of the rules that a family with an alcoholic enforces to maintain familial homeostasis. Black states that these rules are (a) Don't Talk, (b) Don't Feel, and (c) Don't Trust. These rules are so strong that Black estimates that 53% of ECOAs never tell anyone about their suffering (Brake, 1988).

The familial roles that emanate from these rules do not remain contained within the family. The emotive and behavioral correlates of these roles spill over into school and social interaction. As such, they can set up life-long patterns of poor mental health. ECOAs tend to enact one or more of the alcoholic family roles detailed in literature (Birkle, 1993; Metzger, 1988). Metzger (1988) describes these roles as: (a) Family Hero—this child seeks achievement to counterbalance the dysfunction of either or both parents; (b) Scapegoat—this child is propelled toward problems to draw attention away from familial denial about alcoholism; (c) Lost Child—this child adapts to familial dysfunction by disappearing, and often ends up the most damaged child; and (d) Mascot—the mascot attempts to add to the denial process by creating diversions (e.g., a class clown). Some of the above stated roles can cause great disruption in a classroom. Other roles appear on the surface to be productive patterns of school behavior. However, in the long run, maintaining any of these roles exacts huge psychological costs (Rowe, 1989; Scheitlin, 1990).

Implications

As a group, ECOAs have problems with cognitive, behavioral, and familial functioning. Thus, ECOAs are at-risk to: (a) encounter long term mental health problems; and (b) fail to reach their potential in their workplace—the classroom. Therefore, it is the obligation of professional school and mental health counselors to devise and carry out intervention strategies that are efficacious with this population. Two particular areas where professional counselors can assist ECOAs are behavioral and familial functioning.

In reference to behavioral functioning, Cloninger's work is valuable to professional counselors who work with ECOAs for two reasons. First, as West and Prinz (1987) point out in their study, the emotive and behavioral systems of ECOAs vary given the type of alcoholism present in the parent. Cloninger's ideas give a counselor a valuable framework in which to understand a parent's alcoholism and its possible consequences for that parent's offspring. For instance, the constellation of issues for the child of a Type II alcoholic will differ dramatically from the constellation of a child who has a Type I alcoholic parent. Thus, to create the most efficacious intervention, a counselor must match interventions with parental alcoholism typology. One would miss important issues for children of both types if one lumped the two types of ECOAs into the same group.

The other main value of Cloninger's theory for practitioners is that his work presents a way to conceptualize and intervene with respect to the biological core of at-risk potential in children. One could address environmental symptoms for years and still not make progress if the biology of the problem remains unchecked. For instance, a case concerning an acting-out adopted child with a Type II biological parent. A clinician ignorant of Cloninger's ideas may invest all of his or her time focusing on environmental or intrapsychic conflicts to resolve the acting-out behavior. Yet, while this focus may temporarily resolve certain environmental or intrapsychic issues, the reason for the presenting problem would be left untouched. In other words, Cloninger's ideas allow the clinician to address causes rather than just symptoms (e.g., Mulder, Joyce, & Cloninger, 1994). Thus, the opportunity

for long term positive therapeutic results is enhanced. Besides Cloninger's ideas, theoretical work on dysfunctional family roles are particularly germane to counselors. An understanding of these roles can help school and mental health counselors form effective interventions with ECOAs.

Robert Ackerman (1983), one of the seminal thinkers concerning ECOAs, believes that support groups are an excellent intervention strategy with this population. Ackerman states that ECOAs need to learn that: (a) they are not at fault for what occurs in the family; (b) they can develop trusting relationships with others that will not be violated; and (c) they are at-risk for substance abuse and must act accordingly. Webb (1993) notes that support groups give ECOAs a "safe space" to develop new interpersonal patterns. Besides Ackerman, other counseling professionals suggest support group interventions for this population (Beeson, et al., 1987; O'Rourke, 1990; Webb, 1993).

Another reason support groups are a good choice for professional counselors is that this method provides more therapeutic "bang for the buck." In the same time a counselor could see 10 individual clients, he or she could serve 100 in a group setting. Also, in a group setting, the counselor is not the sole therapeutic agent. Many who have worked with ECOAs in support groups report real growth has occurred in a child because of a peer's constructive confrontation or offer of support. Beeson, et al. (1987) contains an excellent support group program designed by practicing counselors specifically for ECOAs.

Despite the benefits noted above, ECOA support groups can at times be contraindicated. As noted earlier, some children have experienced such emotionally toxic alcoholic parents that they do not possess the necessary ego strength for even a supportive group experience. Jesse (1989) states that these children meet the diagnostic criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As such, they rely solely on primitive defense mechanism such reaction formation or regression to protect against anxiety (Tower, 1989). Jesse suggests that for these children, intensive individual therapy be a prerequisite to a group experience.

Conclusion

This article examined the theory and pragmatics concerning work with ECOAs. Counselors have only recently begun to acknowledge the impact that parental alcoholism has on the performance of elementary school aged students. With this acknowledgement comes hope. Unlike many other ills in society, the effects of parental alcoholism can be addressed effectively by professional school and mental health counselors.

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