

Is Mental Health Problems Associated with Problematic School Absenteeism among 11-12-Year-Old Children in Denmark?

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Background:

Regular school attendance is fundamental to children's cognitive and social development and therefore persistent school absenteeism is a serious problem. The negative implications of excessive absenteeism in terms of academic underperformance, school dropout, increased risk behavior and problems in adulthood are well established but knowledge about the causes of school absenteeism is still lacking.

Aim:

The aim of this study was to explore whether mental health problems among 11-12-year-old Danish children were associated with problematic school absenteeism and whether the child's gender and type of mental health problems affected the association.

Methods: This population-based cross-sectional study merged data from the 'Danish National Birth Cohort (DNBC)' with data on school attendance from a national register. Mental health was assessed with the parent version of 'The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)' and problematic absenteeism was defined as 'more than 10% absence during a school year'. A total of 36,222 children between the ages of 11 and 12 were included, and multiple logistic regression analysis, providing adjusted odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI), were performed.

Results:

The study showed that problematic absenteeism was associated with mental health problems measured by increased total SDQ-score as well as increased impact score. The odds of problematic absenteeism were approximately doubled among both boys and girls with abnormal impact score (ORboys: 1.89, 95% CI: 1.41; 2.52 & ORgirls: 2.26, 95% CI: 1.67; 3.07), and children with both abnormal total SDQ-score and abnormal impact score had the highest prevalence of problematic absenteeism. Emotional problems showed the strongest association for both sexes, whilst associations between peer and conduct problems and problematic absenteeism were only statistically significant in girls. None of the suggested differences between boys and girls was statistically significant.

Conclusion:

In line with international studies, emotional and social problem proved to be associated with problematic absenteeism among Danish children. The results point out the need of intensified efforts towards children with these types of mental health problems, but since the etiology is still unclear absenteeism and its correlates should be further explored in future research.