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Seeking Multiple Perspectives: A Qualitative Investigation of ADHD in Ireland
2011 SRCD Biennial Meeting, Montreal
Ruth McIntyre & Dr. Eilis Hennessy, School of Psychology, University College Dublin

Lived Experience of ADHD

ADHD is a common disorder of childhood, affecting approximately 5.29% of children worldwide (Polanczyk et al., 2007). It is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. As each child with ADHD presents with symptoms to different degrees (Taylor, 2009) the lived experiences of those affected by the disorder may vary considerably. Although ADHD has received an enormous amount of research attention in recent years, the focus has largely been on neuro-biological factors. As a result there is a significant gap with little research looking at the qualitative experiences of those directly affected by the disorder.

Seeking Multiple Perspectives

The aim of the current study was to seek the perspectives of children, parents and teachers in order to develop a rich and contextual understanding of ADHD in Ireland

Child Characteristics

<table>
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<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Mean age in years</th>
<th>Male/female ratio</th>
<th>Inattentive</th>
<th>Hyperactive/Impulsive</th>
<th>Combined</th>
<th>Co-morbid ODD</th>
<th>Co-morbid CD</th>
<th>Medication</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Mean number of years diagnosed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>1:0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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Mixed Methods

All participants took part in semi-structured interviews and completed one or more questionnaires. Interviews were analyzed using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Tools for Child Interviews:
- Photographs
- Talking Mats (Murphy & Cameron, 2001)

ADHD Takes Over

Both parents and teachers described the demanding nature of children with ADHD. For parents this can mean that they have less time for their other children.

I don’t even allow [daughter] to open the TV until he finishes [his homework] and she is all grumpy and unhappy and a lot of times she’d want to talk to me about something...and I tell her just a minute just a minute (Mother of 9 year old boy)

For teachers it can be a challenge to balance the needs of all the children in their classroom.

If he’s having a bad day then it really has a huge impact and it prevents the other children from learning because you just don’t get to do anything with them (Teacher of 7 year old boy)

For children ADHD had a significant impact on their lives. Children described getting into trouble, feeling wronged, hating school, sibling conflict, and peer rejection.

My teacher keeps shouting at me (7 year old boy)

If he’s having a bad day then it really has a huge impact and it prevents the other children from learning because you just don’t get to do anything with them (Teacher of 7 year old boy)

Getting Your Head Around ADHD

When asked what ADHD meant to them only five of the fifteen children in this study were able to offer an explanation. Meanings centered around taking tablets, being forgetful, needing to control self, getting into trouble, finding it hard to cope, and being no fun. The remaining children either ignored the question or said they didn’t know what ADHD meant.

My teacher keeps shouting at me (7 year old boy)

For teachers ADHD and what behavior is just bold (Teacher of 7 year old boy)

Parents and teachers reported struggling to make sense of ADHD.

Maybe that’s his personality maybe that’s ADHD maybe ADHD is personality and vice versa I genuinely don’t know (Mother of 7 year old boy)

Stigma

Both parents and children commented on the stigmatizing experiences associated with ADHD. Parents spoke about being blamed, the lack of respect for the diagnosis, other people’s ignorance, discrimination, guilt by association for siblings, and assumptions about home life. Children in particular spoke about keeping their diagnosis a secret.

My mum said not to [tell other people about [ADHD], she said it’s a secret between us...I don’t want to tell people my secrets (9 year old boy)

The experience of stigma was reflected in teachers’ reports about complaints from other children, lack of training about the condition and not openly acknowledging it.

There was an issue that happened last year [another parent] thought it would be better if her child didn’t sit beside [child with ADHD] (Teacher of 7 year old boy)

It’s Not All Bad

Nearly all children, parents, and teachers had something positive to say about their experiences. Positive attributes of children were described as well as improvements over time.

ADHD is just like having a gift that lets you have a lot of exercise that lets you have a lot of energy (7 year old boy)

He’s got a whole little eccentric and endearing side to him, he’s very beautiful and he’s very loving...he’s got a huge capacity for caring which is amazing considering all the stuff he’s had to go through (Mother of 7 year old boy)

Although there can be outbursts [his personality] is actually probably his strength, he’s a lovely character (Teacher of 8 year old boy)

Conclusion

In order to fully understand the impact of ADHD it is important to consider the views of multiple informants. Together these views may contribute to a deeper understanding of this highly prevalent disorder.

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Contact Information: ruth.mcintyre@ucdconnect.ie