

Callous-Unemotional Traits in Preschoolers: Distinct Associations with Empathy Subcomponents

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Abstract : Object: Children scoring high on Callous-Unemotional traits (CU traits) exhibit lack of empathy. More specifically, children scoring high on CU traits appear to exhibit deficits on affective empathy or deficits in other constructs. However, little is known about cognitive empathy, and its relation with CU traits in preschoolers. Despite the fact that empathy is measurable at a very young age, relatively less study has focused on empathy in preschoolers than older children with CU traits. The present study examines the cognitive and affective empathy in preschoolers with CU traits. The aim was to examine the differences between cognitive and affective empathy in those individuals. Based on previous research in children with CU traits, it was hypothesized that preschoolers scoring high in CU traits will show deficits in both cognitive and affective empathy; however, more deficits will be detected in affective empathy rather than cognitive empathy. Method: The sample size was 209 children, of which 109 were male, and 100 were female between the ages of 3 and 7 ($M=4.73$, $SD=0.71$). From those participants, only 175 completed all the items. The Inventory of Callous-Unemotional traits was used to measure CU traits. Moreover, the Griffith Empathy Measure (GEM) Affective Scale and the Griffith Empathy Measure (GEM) Cognitive Scale was used to measure Affective and Cognitive empathy, respectively. Results: Linear Regression was applied to examine the preceding hypotheses. The results showed that generally, there was a moderate negative association between CU traits and empathy, which was significant. More specifically, it has been found that there was a significant and negative moderate relation between CU traits and cognitive empathy. Surprisingly, results indicated that there was no significant relation between CU traits and affective empathy. Conclusion: The current findings support that preschoolers show deficits in understanding others emotions, indicating a significant association between CU traits and cognitive empathy. However, such a relation was not found between CU traits and affective empathy. The current results raised the importance that there is a need for focusing more on cognitive empathy in preschoolers with CU traits, a component that seems to be underestimated till now.

Keywords : affective empathy, callous-unemotional traits, cognitive empathy, preschoolers

Conference Title : ICESE 2021 : International Conference on Emotion, Sympathy and Empathy

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : February 22-23, 2021