Behavioral Health Screening: Validation of a Strength-based Approach

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OBJECTIVE: To evaluate the validity of the Behavioral Health Checklist (BHCL) strength-based factor scores and the extent to which this factor has a buffering effect on the relationship between behavioral health symptom severity and children's social problems. METHOD: The parents of 1,392 children aged 4 to 12 completed the BHCL and Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) during sick and well-child visits to urban and suburban primary care practices affiliated with a large children's hospital. RESULTS: Findings support a single, strength-based factor on the BHCL, and the structure was largely invariant across race, sex, and socioeconomic status. Increased psychopathology symptoms (internalizing, externalizing, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) and lower levels of strengths predicted increased social problems ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, the interaction terms were statistically significant in all analyses, suggesting that higher levels of strengths may buffer the deleterious impact of psychopathology symptoms on social problems. Post hoc analyses indicated that the buffering influence of strengths on the relationship between psychopathology symptoms and social problems was clinically meaningful except in the older sample for the relationship between externalizing and social problems. CONCLUSION: The findings support the validity of a strength-based factor of the BHCL and indicate that this factor has a buffering effect on the association between the degree of child mental health symptoms and level of social impairment. This factor, in combination with the problem-focused factors of the BHCL, provides a balanced approach to screening children's mental health functioning.

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