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PhD Dissertation Defense

Entitled

*ASSESSING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN UAE:
DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRESCHOOL AUTISM CHECKLIST (PAC) FOR TEACHERS*

by

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Abstract

The study aims to develop a new assessment tool for teachers to identify the early signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in preschool children in the UAE. There are limited instruments available to assess Autism in preschool children based on reports from their teachers. The Preschool Autism Checklist (PAC) was developed with special consideration to the Gulf culture. The main objective of this dissertation is to help preschool teachers assess their Emirati students to indicate the cases at risk of ASD. The study investigates previous research on ASD in the UAE and other countries in the Gulf region for more than a decade. A mixed-methods study was used to design and validate PAC. ASD symptoms were collected from the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and ASD scales with the consideration of 18 special teachers' feedback and recommendations. The study consisted of 3 phases: (i) The development Phase, (ii) testing PAC reliability using data from 380 Emirati preschool students rated by their 26 teachers from different parts of the UAE, and (iii) Assessing the validity of PAC with the Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC). The result of the test/retest reliability reveals that there is a significant correlation in the preschool children's mean scores. Exploratory analysis revealed a three factors structure as follows: repetitive and restrictive behavior ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .90$), Social and communication problems ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .90$); cognitive and sensory disorder ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .92$). Inter-rater reliability confirmed that PAC has a high level of agreement between raters. Moreover, the findings showed differences in the type of disability: children with ASD scored lower than ADHD and typical children. However, the typically developing peers scored higher than the ASD and ADHD children on most problem scales. Overall findings support the use of PAC as a valid instrument to assess children at risk of ASD in the UAE. Results indicated that PAC is a valid and reliable assessment tool for assessing early signs of ASD in preschool children by their teachers. The study's implications and recommendations for tailored interventions in preschool children at risk of ASD are discussed. Although PAC is not a diagnostic tool for ASD, it can detect at-risk ASD cases from preschool children and refer them by their teachers to specialists to obtain an official diagnosis. Further research is needed to check further the psychometric properties of the PAC as an ASD assessment tool for preschool children in the UAE.

Keywords: Autism, ASD, preschool children, teachers, checklist, assessment tool, ABC, UAE