Examining Age as a Potential Correlate of Selective Mutism Severity
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Introduction

- Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder characterized by the consistent lack of speech in certain settings despite the presence of speech in other settings (APA, 2013).
- Symptoms tend to remit as children age, and retrospective research demonstrated a decrease in SM symptoms in young adults among individuals who were diagnosed with SM in childhood, suggesting improvement in SM symptoms with age is common (Laibrock et al., 2013).
- Symptoms of SM may include social withdrawal, fearfulness, and irritability (Diliberto et al., 2018). A child with more severe symptomatology may be more functionally impaired, which can lead to further problems in social environments and therefore can delay normative social development.
- Examining correlates of SM symptom severity is an important first step for understanding potential risk and protective factors associated with functional outcomes. No research currently exists to investigate whether a correlation exists between age and severity of SM symptoms.
- **Aim**: This study investigates the relationship between age and severity of symptoms as measured by the Selective Mutism Questionnaire (SMQ; Bergman et al., 2008).

Method

- Participants included 20 children (n = 13 female) aged 4-13 years old (M = 7.45; SD = 2.6) who had SM or elevated symptoms of SM. Participants were predominantly Caucasian (n = 13) and non-Hispanic (n = 18).
- Participants were recruited from families who were seeking treatment for SM in a private practice setting. These data are collected from pre-treatment assessments as part of an ongoing treatment evaluation study.
- The SMQ is a 23-item parent-report questionnaire that assesses children’s failure to speak across school, home, and social settings, and provides a total score (α = .88 -.97). The SMQ was initially developed using a sample of children aged 3-11 years old.
- Pearson’s correlations were conducted using SPSS.

Results

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMQ School</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMQ Home</td>
<td>-.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMQ Social</td>
<td>-.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMQ Total</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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* p’s >.05 for all domains

Conclusions

- The results indicate that there is no significant correlation between age and severity of symptoms (all p>.05).
- In contrast with previous findings that suggest improvement of SM symptoms with age is common (Laibrock et al., 2013), we did not find any correlation between age and severity of symptoms, indicating that other factors may be associated with severity of SM symptoms over time.
- A limitation of this study is that the SMQ is a parent-report measure, which may reflect parent biases. In addition, amount of previous treatment was not controlled for, which may have impacted results given that this is a treatment-seeking sample. Lastly, the sample included children outside of the age range that the SMQ was initially developed for.
- Future directions include incorporating multi-informant report measures to eliminate parent biases, as well as controlling for previous treatment.