WHAT DO PARENTS EXPECT FROM THEIR CHILDREN (WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS)?

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Nearly all parents have positive expectations about the development of their child. We were interested in whether parents change their expectations if the child has problems in certain areas, like emotion regulation in depressed children. We applied a questionnaire to parents who sought mental health services for their children and to an unaffected control group, asking them how they expect their child to behave in different situations. The items formed scales concerning emotion regulation, pro- and anti-social behavior, peer relations and academic achievement.

Preliminary data from the ongoing study with 28 parents of children at mental health centers and 169 controls show significantly lower expectations of parents seeking help than in the control group in every assessed domain. Between-group differences in the academic field were medium in a statistical sense, while the other between-group differences were large. Interestingly, when looking more closely at the problem scores in the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), we found that only very high scores, higher than the usual cut-off, were associated with lower expectations from the parents.

Our data indicate an adaptation of parents who observed less desirable behavior from their children than parents of healthy children, but parents express only lower expectations if the child shows this behavior at a very high level. Possible implications of the findings for family life and therapy with mentally ill children and their parents are discussed.