Attention Styles of Hyperactive and Normal Girls

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Behavioral characteristics and cognitive skills of teacher-identified hyperactive (n = 24) and normally active (n = 24) first- and second-grade girls were investigated. Teachers rated subjects on the Conners Teacher Rating Scale (TRS). Subjects were given several tasks measuring attentional styles and motor skills. Results suggested that hyperactive girls, like hyperactive boys, have short attention spans and poor concentration when compared with normals. Unlike hyperactive boys, hyperactive girls did not show an impulsive response style, and presented few conduct problems to their teachers. TRS profile patterns of the hyperactive girls were similar to those of hyperactive boys, but cutoff scores currently used for males may not be applicable to females. A direct comparison of hyperactive females and males is advocated.

The hyperactive female has been neglected in research. Despite the fact that about 2% of all girls (compared with 9% of all boys) are estimated to be hyperactive (Barkely, 1981), most of the research has centered exclusively on males. However, since sex differences are especially prevalent in disorders of learning and in school-related problems (Eme, 1979) it is likely that there are sex differences in the display and consequences of hyperactivity.
A first step in identifying sex differences is to compare hyperactive and normal children of the same sex on a variety of measures. Hyperactive and normal males have been compared in several studies, and the attentional deficit is now considered a core symptom of the disorder. The new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) label for the hyperactive disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, with and without Hyperactivity, highlights the diagnostic importance of the attentional deficit.

Many researchers have attempted to refine the term *attentional deficit* by delineating aspects of "attention," such as coming to attention, decision making, and maintaining attention over time (Keogh & Margolis, 1976). Hyperactive boys are believed to have significant problems in sustaining attention to relevant information, as well as in controlling impulsive responses to nonrelevant information (Barkely, 1981; Douglas, 1972). These problems create significant difficulties for the hyperactive boy in the classroom and may result in his falling progressively further behind classmates in school performance from year to year (Henker & Whalen, 1980).

The results of studies on the attentional deficits of hyperactive boys raise the question as to whether such deficits exist in hyperactive girls. To date, very few studies have focused on hyperactive girls, and they have not assessed the attention styles of their subjects.

Battle and Lacey (1972) examined motor activity in 74 middle-class male and female subjects drawn from the Fels longitudinal study. Overactive girls identified during ages 3-6 seemed to channel their hyperactivity into acceptable, achievement-striving behavior, while their male counterparts concentrated on resisting adults and avoiding achievement activities. However, the potential "achievement-motivating" properties of hyperactivity during the 3-to 6-year period did not continue for the females during their grade school years. Battle and Lacey (1972) suggested that while motor hyperactivity in girls may result in some positive experiences with peers, it may also create problems for them when they reach the primary grades. It is especially important, then, to study the hyperactive girls during the ages of 6 through 10, when the maladaptive correlates of their motor hyperactivity may begin to surface.

Prinz and Loney (1974) found that teacher-identified hyperactive girls had difficulties in impulse control and reported poorer self-esteem than their elementary school classmates. The hyperactive girls in their study were also rated as lower in general adjustment than their classmates. Kashani, Chapel, Ellis, and Shekim (1979) compared 28 hyperactive girls with 28 hyperactive boys. The two groups were similar in the main symptoms of hyperactivity but differed on other variables. The hyperactive girls were more often referred for learning disabilities than for behavior disorders.