

Empathy and attention come into focus for preterm kids

January 20 2016, by Teresa Belcher, Sciencenetwork Wa



"The social-cognitive vulnerabilities of children born extremely preterm may well be different from other conditions affecting children like autism," she says. Credit: iStock

Local research has confirmed children born extremely prematurely or 'preterm' have a less developed sense of empathy and poorer attention skills than typically developing children but the work has failed to determine if there is link between the two.

It is common for preterm children to have delays in speech and language development, attention and motor skills, UWA clinical psychologist and lead author Dr Catherine Campbell says.

To better understand the links between developmental delays they set out to determine whether attention skills influence the way extremely preterm children show empathy—the way we understand and share feelings of another—and how this influences how they respond in social situations.

Using the Kids Empathic Development Scale (KEDS), 72 seven-year old children were asked to respond to pictures of cartoon characters in common social interaction situations and choose one of six pre-determined emotions.

From these results the researchers could measure different aspects of the participant's sense of empathy.

"We found the relationship between being born extremely preterm and poorer performance on the KEDS was not explained by their attention abilities in a unique way," Dr Campbell says.

"This means that something else is influencing outcome in terms of their social-cognitive development."

The researchers now plan to evaluate other "executive functions" in the same way—for example working memory and response inhibition.

"We already know that we can help children who have conditions such as autism spectrum disorder to learn social skills that approximate the social skills of children who are typically development," Dr Campbell says.

"However, the social-cognitive vulnerabilities of children born extremely preterm may well be different from other conditions affecting children like autism," she says.

Research is much more focused at the neurocognitive level and interventions at this level of development are unfortunately in their infancy, Dr Campbell says.

There is also a significant group of children born extremely preterm who do not show these cognitive and social difficulties.

This group of children are very important to potentially help researchers identify factors that protect children's development from adverse outcomes of extremely preterm birth, she says.

Research into what causes behaviour differences may improve education opportunities, parental relationships and improve understanding of the origins of impairment.

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