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Caregiver ratings of executive functions among foster children in middle childhood: Associations with early adversity and school adjustment

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Highlights

- The foster children presented executive function difficulties in most areas, especially in behavioral regulation.
- 22% of the foster children presented executive functions difficulties of clinical significance.
- Prenatal substance exposure was associated with a poorer capacity to plan and organize.
- Difficulties in inhibitory control, shift, and working memory were related to poorer school adjustment.
- Interventions aimed at enhancing executive functions could be useful for improving foster children's adaptation.

Abstract

Children in foster care often present difficulties related to executive functions, such as poor school adjustment and impulsivity. Despite their importance, few studies have analyzed executive functions in foster children, especially beyond preschool age. This study sought to analyze the executive functions of a sample of 43 Spanish foster children aged between five and nine years ($M=7.51$, $SD=1.29$), using a caregiver-reported questionnaire. We also explored the relationship between executive functions, early adversity variables, and teacher-reported school adjustment. Results indicate that participants experienced more executive function-related difficulties than the measure's standardization sample in almost all areas, particularly in behavioral regulation, although they were found to have age-appropriate executive function levels in some areas, such as monitoring and organization of materials. Prenatal substance exposure was associated with poorer planning/organization skills, whereas other early adversity variables showed no statistically significant associations with executive functions. A higher level of difficulty in inhibitory control and other areas were associated with poorer school adjustment as reported by teachers. The results of our study point to an important presence of executive function difficulties in foster children in middle childhood, a finding which highlights the need for early intervention efforts targeting these skills among this population.

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Keywords

Foster care; Executive functions; Middle childhood; Early adversity; School adjustment

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