Psychological questions children have:
An investigation into the need for psychological knowledge and understanding among 11-13 year olds

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Abstract

Purpose of Study: to assemble knowledge about the need for psychological knowledge children have and using this as input for the development of a psychology curriculum for high schools in the Netherlands. Research Methods: a survey comprising 513 children (11-13 yrs old). The questionnaire contains over 100 questions about a range of psychological themes. The children were asked if and how often they entertain those questions, where they look for answers to them, if they ask others for answers to these questions, and if so, how satisfied they are with the answers they receive. Findings: The data show that 11-13 year old children already have a high need for psychological knowledge but that this need is often not met satisfactorily. We were able to organize the questions children have in 11 clusters or themes such as ‘the brain’ and ‘consciousness. In the presentation we’ll discuss the method used, the results and their implications. Conclusions: Children of a high school age have a strong need for psychological knowledge and their questions in this respect are important information for developing a (high) school psychology curriculum.

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Keywords: Children; Psychological Questions; Psychology Curriculum
1. Introduction
Little is known about the need or desire for psychological knowledge that children have. Such despite the fact that there is a growing movement both in Northern America and Europe towards inclusion of psychology in the high school curriculum. It is also surprising that this kind of research is so scarce because insight into psychological questions children have, can be useful for parents, teachers and other professionals who work with children. It also could be an important starting point as well as an incentive for the structure and content of high school psychology courses, the research topic of this paper. One of the very few studies on the need for psychological knowledge of children was conducted in the region of Antwerp in Belgium (De Kinder, Van Vaerenbergh & Vanhoomissen, 2009).

2. Problem Statement
During the age period from 8 till 13 the development of children is fast and omnipresent (De Kinder, et al, 2009). It is therefore an interesting period for research into the psychological questions these children have. For example during this period the cognitive development goes from the Piagetian concrete operational stage into the formal operational stage (Berk, 2010; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958); moral reasoning becomes more sophisticated (Gibbs, 2010); emotional relations like friendships with peers evolves and becomes more important (Berk, 2010); physical development can be impressive especially during the start of puberty (Diekstra, 2010) and during this period some psychological disorders like depression can emerge or grown out to become a serious problem (Rigter, 2013). It is to be expected that such developments instigate interest in children in their own and their peers development and the factors that influence this.

3. Research Questions
What are the psychological questions children entering high school have?

4. Purpose of the Study
The purpose of our study is to assemble knowledge about the need for psychological knowledge children have and using this as input for the development of a psychology curriculum for high schools in the Netherlands (see also Torringa, Rigter & Diekstra, 2013 in this book).

5. Research Methods
The study of De Kinder et al. (2009) investigated the psychological questions of children 10 to 12 years of age. The questions were divided in 13 themes like the brain, sensory systems,
consciousness, cognition, family and rearing and problems (such as bullying, suicide and death). The results clearly pointed out that nearly all the children have psychological questions and these questions concern the themes of their own development as cognition, consciousness, morality, friendship and physical development and mainly concern understanding of developmental phenomena and the causes of problems. They are mostly not directed towards finding solutions for problems or changing behavior. The researchers explain these results by emphasizing that children of this age are in the Piagetian concrete operational stage wherein logical ordering and understanding relations are central themes of the cognitive development (De Kinder et al., 2009).

We replicated with some alterations the study of the Kinder et al. (2009), using a sample of 513 children in the first year of high school (11-13 years old). The sample included all children in the first year in high school (11-13 years old) from three high schools throughout the region of Rotterdam (The Netherlands). The questionnaire we used is an adaptation and elaboration of the questionnaire used by De Kinder et al. and contains 138 questions about eleven psychological themes or topics. These themes are: The brain, Sensory organs, Consciousness, Growth and development, Thoughts, Feelings and emotions, Personality, Me and others, Family, Problems and Stress and Test preparation. The children were asked if and how often they entertain questions concerning these themes. They had to point out this answer on a five points-Likert-scale (‘never’, ‘sometimes’, every now and then’, ‘often’ and ‘always’). Examples of the questions are: “Why is one person more intelligent than the other”? (Theme: The brain), “Why can we remember some things better than others? (The brain); “Why do people sometimes see things that are not there?” (The sensory organs); “Do dreams have a specific meaning?” (Consciousness); “Can dreams predict future events?” (Consciousness); “Why are we sometimes not able to fall in sleep again?” (Consciousness) or “What is puberty?” (Growth and Development). On every theme we asked where they get these questions from (‘from this questionnaire’, from school’, ‘from home’, from TV’, from the Internet’ and ‘from somewhere else’); if they (ever) asked these questions and to whom (‘No one’, ‘Friends’, ‘Teacher’, ‘Father or mother’, ‘To someone else’); from whom they received answers to these questions (‘from school’, ‘from home’, from TV’, from the Internet’ and ‘from somewhere else’); and if they were satisfied with the answers they received (‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘I did not ask anyone these questions’).
6. Findings

The data show that 11-13 year olds already have a high need for psychological knowledge but that this need is often not met satisfactorily. The highest average score on questions per theme was for the theme ‘Stress and preparation (of tests)’. The lowest score was for the theme ‘Feelings and emotions’. The most often asked question was: “How can I best prepare myself for a test?” (Theme: ‘Stress and test preparation’; answer category often/always: 26.1%). The second most asked question was: “Why does someone commit suicide when he or she has a lot of problems?” (often/always: 25.1%). The least asked question was: Is the brain of intelligent people larger than the brain of people who are less intelligent (often/always: 2.4%).

We wanted to know what the origin of the questions of the children was. Most of the time the children mentioned the questionnaire itself as the origin of their questions (around 50% for all themes). As if the questionnaire itself evoked their curiosity. ‘Home’, ‘School’ or ‘TV’ were the second most often mentioned origins. And Home and School were the most mentioned origins of their questions regarding the theme ‘Stress and test preparation’ (both 32% vs 22.9% for the questionnaire as origin).

Despite the number of questions they entertain and sometimes the high need for an adequate answer (like the question about best preparation for a test), most children (depending on the theme, ranging from 50 to 60%) didn’t ask these questions to anyone. The children who did asked the questions mostly choses their father or mother for obtaining an answer (depending on the theme between 30% and 40%). Next came teachers (depending on the theme, between 8-15%). Not surprisingly, teachers were most often mentioned with regard to the theme stress and test preparation. However, with regards to the questions on the themes ‘Me and others’ and ‘Problems’ the children preferred their friends above the teacher but after their father or mother to ask the questions (friends vs teacher respectively: 14.6% versus 14.2% and 13.2% versus 10.6%).

A lot of the children didn’t ask their questions at all. Of those who did 14-27% (depending of the theme) were satisfied with the answers they received. The lowest scores on satisfaction with the answers were on the themes ‘Thoughts’ (14.3%), ‘Feelings and emotions’ (14.4%) and ‘The brain’ (15.1%). The highest score on satisfaction was on questions from the theme ‘Stress and test preparation’ (27.8%).
7. Conclusions
Children at high school age have a strong need for psychological knowledge. The questions they entertain, which most of them do not ask to others and those children that do ask most of the time do not receive satisfactory answers, provide important information for the structure and content of (high) school psychology curricula. The knowledge gathered in this study also points to the importance of co-constructing such curricula with the children themselves.

References


