Behavior Problems Often Untreated in Children With Epilepsy

**SUMMARY**

Neurologists may be aware of poor behavior by children with epilepsy, but they often do not know what to do about it, according to new research.

In interviews with parents about their children with epilepsy, descriptions of prominent behavior problems commonly emerge, according to a new study presented at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Epilepsy Society and the American Clinical Neurophysiology Society. The problems, however, are often not treated.

"Behavior problems tend to be ignored in the clinical setting," said lead author Janice Buelow, PhD, RN, assistant professor at Indiana University School of Nursing in Indianapolis. "Only a few children had a behavior management plan and only a few got help from their clinicians."

Ms. Buelow and her team administered semi-structured interviews to 20 parents (18 mothers, 2 fathers) whose responses fell into four major themes:

- I recognize and can manage my child's behaviors.
- My child's behaviors are just part of life.
- My child's behaviors are caused by others' actions.
- My child's behaviors are caused by seizures.

In general, the problems occur in the domains of attention and socialization, and can include inappropriate behavior in public, poor behavior at home and violent and self-injurious behavior.

"Some problems may be related to underlying pathology, and others may have an environmental cause," Ms. Buelow said. Either way, she urged physicians to treat them as legitimate comorbidities. "Most neurologists won't even address the bad behavior. One neurologist said, 'I don't even ask, because I don't know what to do about it.'" she noted.

The researchers recommended that:

- nurses be aware that families often report significant problems other than seizures;
- nurses ask specifically about behavior problems;
- children be assessed to identify the etiology of the problems so a management plan can be developed;
- healthcare providers develop a working relationship with school administrators, teachers and nurses to improve the child's learning environment;
- parents of children with epilepsy be given tools to handle the behaviors; and
- future research address underlying causes of behavior problems with the goal of developing interventions.

—Andrew N. Wilner, MD, FAAN, FACEP

**COMMENT FROM THE FIELD**

To treat just the epilepsy is ignoring the whole child. I also deal with the comorbidities such as sleep hygiene and obstructive sleep apnea. I send the child for formal neuropsychology testing to provide a baseline for addressing the child's behavior problems.

—Dave Clarke, MD

Assistant professor of neurology and pediatrics, University of Tennessee, Memphis, Tenn.