

**MOTHERS' JUDGMENTS OF STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL  
DISTURBANCE AND SOCIAL MALADJUSTMENT/CONDUCT DISORDER:  
COMPARISONS OF TARGET STUDENTS AND SIBLINGS**

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*In response to United States special education law requirements, this study attempted to differentiate emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted students using parent ratings on the FACES III and a newly developed interview measure of primarily internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Forty mothers of students in special education and 40 mothers of students in court schools rated the target student and a close in age sibling. Data showed differences in family typology between the groups. Mothers rated socially maladjusted students similar to siblings but did not rate emotionally disturbed youth similar to siblings. Study results also indicated the importance of peer influence and age of problem onset for multidisciplinary teams to consider in evaluations of emotional disturbance.*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides legal mandates within the United States for identifying students as emotionally disturbed for purposes of receiving special educational services. The criteria include (a) an inability to learn not resulting from intellectual, sensory, or other health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory peer and teacher interpersonal relationships; (c) inappropriate behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (cf. Bower, 1960). Any one of these criteria is sufficient for classifying a student as emotionally disturbed provided that these behaviors are marked, pervasive, and impact educational outcomes.

However, since the publication of these criteria for placing emotionally disturbed (originally seriously emotionally disturbed) students there has been lively debate about their accuracy (Forness, 1992; Nelson, 1992) and their usefulness in practice (e.g., Center, 1990; Gresham, 1991). The federal definition of emotional disturbance has been controversial because it explicitly excluded students who are *socially maladjusted* but failed to define social maladjustment (Skiba & Grizzle, 1992).

As a result of this controversy, the last two decades have witnessed a considerable number of papers addressing differences in characteristics among emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted students; and different positions on whether there are or are not differences between these two terminologies in any conceptual, measurable, or practical sense (e.g., Cheney & Sampson, 1990; Clarizio, 1987; Clarizio & Higgins, 1988; Forness, 1992; Forness, Kavale, & Lopez, 1993; Fox & Stinnett, 1996; Kavale, Forness, & Alper, 1986; Smith, 1985; Terrasi, Sennett, & Macklin, 1999; Tharinger, Laurent, & Best, 1986; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1990). Because special education law has required this differential diagnosis (as opposed to the question as to whether socially maladjusted students should be excluded) studies have examined a variety of measures to distinguish emotional disturbance from social maladjustment (e.g., Costenbader & Buntaine, 1999). These measures have included intelligence and personality tests, health and social functioning questionnaires, behavior checklists and rating scales, sociometric measures (e.g., Terrasi, Sennett, & Macklin, 1999), and the *Differential Test of Conduct and Emotional Problems* (Kelly, 1991).

However, to date, research has not examined parent ratings particularly in regard to behavior in relation to siblings. Parent ratings should provide useful supplementary information comparing emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth because the federal definition specifically highlights the early developmental course of emotional disturbance. That is, there is the expectation that either due to developmental factors or trauma emotionally disturbed youth would be expected to show behavior distinct from siblings. By contrast, most definitions of socially maladjusted students have suggested that antisocial behaviors result from socialization processes at home or in peer groups (Nelson, 1992; Rutter & Giller, 1983) and that these behaviors occur after an earlier developmental period of relatively normal functioning.

In making predictions about how parents might differentially perceive emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth, and in obtaining representative samples it is important to try and define the two categories, and, at least initially, determine distinct and overlapping behavioral sequelae. Given the existing definitional problems this is no easy task. Depression, academic difficulties, inappropriate behavior and emotion, and poor peer and adult relationships have been shown to characterize both groups (Benson, Edwards, Rosell, & White, 1986; Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1990; Slenkovich, 1983). However, the factors underlying these behaviors for the two groups may differ. For example, while both groups appear to have poor interpersonal skills, the emotionally disturbed student, as compared to the socially maladjusted student is described as overly dependent, ignored or rejected, and having fewer or younger friends than the socially maladjusted student (Clarizio, 1987).

Emotionally disturbed youth are described as having a persistent and chronic impairment in behavior, perceptions, cognition, and communication. They are characterized as anxious, having poor social relationships and insensitivity to interpersonal cues, as showing limited responsiveness to praise or criticism, and as preferring younger and socially immature playmates. They are portrayed as having a poor self-image, being loners and followers (Terrasi, Sennett, & Macklin, 1999), having internalizing disorders, demonstrating unpredictable behavior, coming from dysfunctional families, having a history of mental health treatment, and more likely to be *disturbed* than *disturbing* (Clarizio, 1987).

By contrast, the research has suggested that while socially maladjusted youth can and do interact effectively with other behavior problem peers even though they are defiant toward authority figures.

These students tend to come from families in which other family members have a history of antisocial activities, and manipulation, intimidation, and aggression to gratify their needs. Although lacking in self-control, the inappropriate behavior of these youth has been described as more willful and less remorseful than the actions of emotionally disturbed students. The literature, including data on psychologists' and educators' behavior judgments (Cole, 1990; Costenbader & Buntaine, 1999; Fox & Stinnett, 1996) has portrayed socially maladjusted students as displaying Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder. With values that often conflict with society's standards, they are described as self-centered, and, unlike emotionally disturbed students they are not considered to be in *chronic* distress although they show anxiety, withdrawal, and distress when facing the consequences of their antisocial behavior. Further, these students do not typically respond to the same treatment interventions that benefit emotionally disordered students.

To date, few studies have examined the families of youth with profiles mirroring emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted students (Boyle & Jones, 1985; Clarizio, 1987; Clarizio & Higgins, 1988; Skiba & Grizzle, 1991) and no studies have compared the behavior and developmental histories of these youth with their siblings. Acknowledging that emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth often manifest similar behaviors, one assumption guiding this exploratory study was that the two groups could potentially be differentiated on the basis of parent ratings and family circumstances (Nelson, 1992). Parent ratings would appear to be an important area of research given that children with poor social and coping skills often have histories of family attachment difficulties (Belsky & Nezworski, 1988; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leith, 1987). If hypothetically, socially maladjusted students' behaviors are acquired or reinforced within a familial or subculture context to a greater extent than the behaviors of emotionally disturbed students, it is logical to assume that their siblings would be more likely to demonstrate inappropriate behaviors than would the siblings of emotionally disturbed students.

Three research questions guided the present study: (a) what student characteristics can be identified by parents that shed light on youth with characteristics most similar to those typically labeled emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted; (b) in what ways, if any, do these youth differ from siblings who are close to their age; and (c) are there differences in the family typologies between emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted students. Using parent ratings this study attempted to develop a preliminary version of a measure to assess differences between these two populations. Such a scale would help sensitize school-based teams to sound criteria to be used to differentiate these two groups of students as required by federal special education law.

## **Method**

### *Scale Development*

#### *Instrument Overview*

This research's initial objective was the development of a preliminary version of a parent survey instrument to provide some initial differentiation of emotional disturbance from social maladjustment/ conduct disorder. The instrument was designed to include (a) parental descriptions of child behaviors, (b) information on developmental history, and (c) ratings of children's community functioning.

#### *Item Selection*

Instrument development began with a thorough literature review and examination of existing behavior measures to locate potential items and categories potentially useful for differentiating

emotional disturbance from social maladjustment/conduct disorder (Achenbach & Edlebrock, 1981; Bower, 1960; Center, 1990; Clarizio, 1987; Cullinan & Epstein, 1984; Cullinan, Schloss & Epstein, 1987; DeYoung, 1984; Kelly, 1988; Quay & Peterson, 1983; Sherpard-Look, 1985; Slenkovich, 1983; Tibbets, Pike, & Welch, 1987; Wirt, Lachar, Klinedinst, Seat, & Broen, 1977). The initial items included overt behaviors, individual characteristics of children, aspects of psychosocial development, indicators of family, peer, school, and community functioning, and patterns of family organization and functioning (marital status and number of family members in the home). Questions were written to assess the frequency of easily observable positive (manifested behaviors) and negative (skill deficits, symptoms) observable behaviors. Unlike the *Differential Test of Conduct and Emotional Problems* that has distinct scales for conduct and emotional disorders, the present measure was constructed so that students would receive one overall score on a continuum such that behaviors theoretically more indicative of emotional disturbance would produce higher scale scores and behaviors more indicative of social maladjustment would yield lower scores. Students sharing characteristics of both groups would score in the middle range of the score continuum.

### ***Content Selection and Content Validity***

Ten California school psychologists (three Masters and seven doctoral level) averaging 14 years of work experience initially reviewed 95 potential instrument items drawn from the research literature for their relevance to emotional disturbance/social maladjustment and clarity for parent interviewees. Sixty-five items were retained where 80% or more of the psychologists agreed that the items were construct relevant and clear.

### ***Participants***

For the scale development phase of this research the participants were the mothers of 20 students being served in emotionally disturbed special education programs and the mothers of 20 students being served in court schools in Riverside County, California. The special education students were being served in a non-public school program certified by the state of California for seriously emotionally disturbed students based on the procedures set forth in Public Law 101-476; California Special Education Programs Title 5 code of regulations; and the Riverside County Special Education Local Planning Area. The Special Education Local Plan Area in Riverside, California monitors the programs in these schools. The students selected to approximate a socially maladjusted/conduct disordered group were drawn from the Riverside County Office of Education Court Schools program and were adjudicated by the court system. These women provided feedback on item clarity and intrusiveness and rated their child being served by a special program and the sibling closest in age to that child. This sample only participated in the scale development phase of the study. This procedure was used in the validation of the final version of the instrument and is described in greater detail subsequently.

Several statistical steps were followed in instrument development to assure reliability and validity by identifying individual items that did not account for the patterns of covariation. A covariance (correlation) matrix was constructed followed by extractions to identify latent variables that accounted for the patterns of covariation among the instrument items. Then the correlations between each item and the normalized factor scores were examined. These procedures yielded three distinct factors. Item inspection indicated that the factors represented predominately internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, or a combination of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Following this all the primary factors that accounted for the most covariation among all the test

items were extracted, the number of primary factors specified, and varimax rotation of factors applied. Then Cronbach Alpha coefficient computations were applied to the item groupings. An assumption of the Alpha coefficient is that there is equivalence among survey items on which there is a range of possible answers. To ensure that the individual items on the instrument were producing similar patterns of responding across parents and that item responses were homogeneous and reliable, we sought reliability coefficients no less than .70. The final step was the application of a conservative post-hoc Scheffe test to determine if the total score of the items would distinguish between the four populations (emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth and their siblings). The Scheffe test was used to compute a single critical difference among means and minimizes the probability of Type I error (Bruning & Kintz, 1987).

### ***Reliability***

The internal consistency of the measure was analyzed using item-by-item correlation and item to total scale correlations. Items were sought that measured both positive and negative symptoms and whose intercorrelations (redundancy) was low (Knoff, 1995). The average inter-item correlation during the pilot study phase for the instrument was  $r = .14$  ( $N=40$ ).

### ***Factor Analysis***

A factor analysis was performed on the scale's variables in order to reduce the number of variables in the analysis and to determine the weight each individual factor had for the total outcome. A final multiple regression analysis was used to determine which factors contributed unique variance. With a Cronbach Alpha value of .85 ( $N = 40$ ), the measurement scale is comprised of items that are fairly homogenous. The ability of the scale to make discriminations among students in emotionally disturbed and court classes is discussed later.

A mean as close to the center of the range of possible scores was deemed necessary in order to adequately discriminate between different populations. Items with means near the extreme of response range will have lower variances and will correlate poorly with other items. Thus, items with lopsided means ( $>1.7$  or  $>4.3$ ) and items with low variances were eliminated from the scale. These were questions about students' getting in trouble in the community, pretending to be ill to avoid school, needing reminders to change clothes or bathe, their gang involvement, and their running away to avoid punishment. Another item measuring the frequency of unexpected behavior also was eliminated because it lowered the internal consistency of the measure.

The final version of the parent instrument contained 45 interview questions. Twenty-nine questions on a Likert scale comprised the factors used to derive total scores (see Appendix A).

### ***Factor Structure***

The factor analysis of the parental interview scale produced three clear factors. Factor One was comprised of items 5, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 20, 24, 28, 29, 30, 32, 35, 36, 40, and 42, and reflects primarily internalizing behaviors. Factor loadings ranged from .49 to .85 on this factor. Factor Two was comprised of items 6, 8, 21, 22, 23, 33, and 39, reflected primarily externalizing behaviors, and factor loadings ranged from .38 to .80. Factor Three included combined internalizing and externalizing behaviors, was comprised of items 12, 25, 26, 27, and 41, and factor loadings ranged from .49 to .58. Items 51 and 53 did not load significantly on any factor.

Item 45 required the mother to rate her confidence in her knowledge about the child and is used for clinical purposes.

**Test Re-test Reliability**

Five mothers of youth in emotionally disturbed classes and five mothers of youth from court schools drawn from the original pilot group completed the final version of the scale twice within a two-week period. The test re-test reliability coefficient was .78.

**Validity**

*Discriminant validity.* Using a one way analysis of variance and a Scheffe post-hoc test on the total scale scores for the four target groups, the groups did statistically differ from one another,  $F(3, 36) = 14.30$ ,  $MSE = 123.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . The results of the Scheffe test (found in Table 1) showed a statistically significant difference between the total parent ratings for the emotionally disturbed youth compared to the other three rated groups and in the expected direction.

**Table 1**  
**Total Scores on Parent Perception Scale for Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students in Scale Development Phase: Means, Standard Deviations**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	SED Siblings
Socially Maladjusted (SM)			***	
93.5 (6.79)				
SM Siblings			***	
91.6 (11.20)				
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)	***	***		***
122.2 (13.26)				
ED Siblings			***	
84.2 (12.66)				

Standard Deviations in Parentheses

\*\*\* Scheffe test  $p < .001$

*Construct validity.* A one-way analysis of variance was computed on the items of the scale identified as measuring internalized behaviors. These items were found to discriminate to a statistically significant degree,  $F(3, 36) = 13.78$ ,  $MSE = 36.25$ ,  $p < .001$ . Table 2 reports the Scheffe post-hoc test difference in the means between the sample groups.

**Table 2**  
**Scores on I Factor Items on Parent Perception Scale for Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students: Means, Standard Deviations**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	SED Siblings
Socially Maladjusted (SM)			***	
28.70 (4.44)				
SM Siblings			***	
28.20 (6.94)				
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)	***	***		***
43.20 (8.38)				
ED Siblings			***	
23.70 (8.11)				

Standard Deviations in Parentheses

\*\*\* Scheffe test  $p < .001$

On the items that were identified as measuring externalized behaviors, the difference between the groups was also significant, although not to the same extent as the variables comprising the Internalizing Factor,  $F(3, 36) = 4.01$ ,  $MSE = 16.14$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 3**  
**Scores on E Factor Items on Parent Perception Scale for Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students: Means, Standard Deviations**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	SED Siblings
Socially Maladjusted (SM)	44.70	(4.16)		
SM Siblings	44.80	(5.45)	***	
Emotionally Disturbed (SED)	53.90	(5.86)	*	
ED Siblings	46.90	(4.38)		

Standard Deviations in Parentheses

\*\*\* Scheffe test  $p < .001$ , \* Scheffe test  $p < .05$

Table 3 reports the Scheffe post-hoc test difference in the means. Items that were identified as being a combination of internalized and externalized behaviors yielded scores of statistical significance,  $F(3,36) = 9.68$ ,  $MSE = 10.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . The accompanying Scheffe scores are found in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Scores on C Factor Items on Parent Perception Scale for Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students: Means, Standard Deviations**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	SED Siblings
Socially Maladjusted (SM)	18.00	(3.16)		**
SM Siblings	16.80	(3.88)		*
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)	20.10	(2.85)		***
ED Siblings	12.30	(2.75)	**	*

Standard Deviations in Parentheses

\*\*\* Scheffe test  $p < .001$ , \* Scheffe test  $p < .05$

As a result of the pre-test, none of the scale items were edited or deleted based upon either parental input or statistical criteria. The version of the scale used in the primary study was called the Parent Perception Scale.

### **Primary Study: Target Group Comparisons**

#### ***Participants***

The eighty participants for the primary study were 40 biological mothers of students being served in emotionally disturbed special education programs and 40 mothers of students being served in court schools in Riverside County, California. These participants were drawn from the same population as the one used in scale development but represented a different subset of the population.

From a potential population of 250 students receiving special education the names of 50 students were drawn and ultimately 40 mothers of these students (80%) agreed to participate. From a population of 175 students in the court schools with *no prior history of special education emotional disturbance* parent consent was obtained from 40 mothers (representing 33% of women contacted). As in the preliminary scale development phase, the mothers described both the identified client child and a sibling closest in age to that child. Thus, mothers provided interview data for four distinct groups totaling 160 youth ratings: 40 emotionally disturbed youth, 40 siblings of emotionally disturbed youth, 40 socially maladjusted youth, and 40 siblings of socially maladjusted youth.

### ***Procedure and Instruments***

Parents identified for the study were initially telephoned and told that this study was designed to better understand children like theirs and was part of a dissertation. They were told that the questions to be addressed at a later date would deal with their family and their child's behaviors. They were told that if they agreed to participate that they would receive a *letter of consent* to be signed and returned, and that they then would be called by an interviewer. The informed consent letter was sent to those who gave initial agreement. This letter indicated that the parent would be asked questions about the particular child in question and also about the *child closest in age to the one reported on*. Parents were told that all information provided would be confidential, that they could complete all or parts of the survey, and that they were free not to participate. They were told that they would receive a receive packet with questionnaires to be followed during the interview procedure. All interviews were conducted over the telephone by a professional telephone interviewer who was blind to the sample population to which the child was assigned as well as the purpose of the research.

The research packet sent to participants included the two copies of the Parent Perception Scale and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale – III (FACES III) (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). The FACES III was used as a measure of family functioning and to go beyond the measurement of specific individual behavioral outcomes. The instruments were completed in two phone interviews with questions about the target child addressed in interview one and questions about the sibling addressed in interview two. The FACES III was always administered during the first phone interview counterbalancing its presentation with the parent interview scale.

FACES III is a 20- item self-report inventory with norms on over 1000 families nationwide measuring a family's level of adaptability (roles, rules, and relationships) and family cohesion (emotional bonding). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always) and sample items include *Family members like to spend free time with one another* and *Rules change in our family*” FACES III assesses positive and negative family communication skills. FACES III has adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha=.68$  for the full instrument), test-retest reliability ( $r=.80$  to  $.83$ ), and is not heavily influenced by socially desirable responding ( $r=.00$  to  $.36$ ). It has been found to effectively discriminate between symptomatic and non-symptomatic families (Olson, 1986), delinquent and non-delinquent families (Rodick, Henggeler & Hanson, 1986), and families with destructive parent-child interactions (Garbarino, Sebes & Schellinbach, 1985). FACES III is defined as circumplex model in that it allows a summed score to be plotted along a two dimensional continuum with the constructs *cohesion* and *adaptability* being treated as coordinated axes (Edman, Cole, & Howard, 1990). Unlike adaptability and cohesion,



communication is considered to be a facilitative dimension and is not included graphically in the model. The points on the coordinated axes range from low to high and the placement of the summed score on the continuum is used to place family's functioning into one of sixteen different family typologies. The extremes of the adaptability continuum are *chaotic* (high end) and *rigid* (low end) and *enmeshed* (high end) and *disengaged* (low end) for the cohesion continuum. The family typologies are represented as four *extreme*, four *balanced* and eight *midrange*. The *balanced* types are defined as being the four central ones that are balanced on both cohesion and adaptability dimensions. The *midrange* types are defined by being extreme on one dimension and balanced on the other. The *extreme* types are defined by being extreme on both dimensions. FACES III is conceptualized to be a curvilinear model; families that score at the ends of one or both of the dimensions on the axes appear dysfunctional (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985).

## Results

### *Student and Family Characteristics*

There were no significant age differences in the four rated groups of students ( $p = >.12$ ). Youth with emotional disturbance had a mean age of 14.8 years ( $SD = 2.0$ ) and their siblings had a mean age of 15.0 years ( $SD = 4.3$ ). Fifty-three percent of these students resided in intact homes and only 3% resided with a single parent. Court school youth had a mean age of 15.8 years ( $SD = 1.6$ ) and their siblings had a mean age of 16.3 years ( $SD = 3.0$ ). Twenty-one percent resided in intact homes and 23% resided with a single parent. The families of socially maladjusted students also were significantly ( $p <.01$ ) larger ( $M=3.8$  children) than the families of emotionally disturbed students ( $M=2.8$  children). None of the other demographic items discriminated between the student groups.

The FACES III assessed family typology differences between special education and court-schooled students. The chi square quotient of 29.63 ( $p <.01$ ) showed that there was a significant difference in their family typologies (see Table 5).

**Table 5**  
*Number and Relative Percentages of Families of Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students for FACES III Family Topologies*

Type	N	SM Percentage	Families	N	ED Percentage	Families
1. Chaotic Disengaged	10	25.0		1	2.5	
2. Chaotic Separated	1	2.5		0	0.0	
3. Chaotic Connected	2	5.0		2	5.0	
4. Chaotic Enmeshed	0	0.0		2	5.0	
5. Flexible Disengaged	3	7.5		7	17.5	
6. Flexible Separated	0	0.0		3	7.5	
7. Flexible Connected	1	2.5		1	2.5	
8. Flexible Enmeshed	0	0.0		3	7.5	
9. Structured Disengaged	6	15.0		3	7.5	
10. Structured Separated	0	0.0		1	2.5	
11. Structured Connected	8	20.0		4	10.0	
12. Structured Enmeshed	0	0.0		6	15.0	
13. Rigid Disengaged	7	17.0		5	12.5	
14. Rigid Separated	1	2.5		1	2.5	
15. Rigid Connected	1	2.5		0	0.0	
16. Rigid Enmeshed	0	0.0		1	2.5	

Chi Square = 29.63  $p <.01$

Table 6 shows that only 23% of the students' families demonstrated *balanced* cohesion and adaptability. Moreover, in the *extreme* category, there were almost twice as many socially maladjusted than emotionally disturbed students.

**Table 6**  
*Balanced, Midrange and Extreme Positions of the Families of Socially Maladjusted and Emotionally Disturbed Students on FACES III*

	SM Families	ED Families
Balanced position	9	9
Midrange position	14	22
Extreme position	17	

### ***Involvement with Community Agencies***

Scale questions addressed student involvement with family court, police department, child protective services, social services, and mental health departments. A chi-square on these percentages indicated significant differences in the four groups for involvement with the police ( $p < .001$ ), social services ( $p < .05$ ), and mental health ( $p < .001$ ). Consistent with prior research (see Table 7) emotionally disturbed youth are reported to receive mental health/social services whereas socially maladjusted students are reported to have involvement with the criminal justice system.

**Table 7**  
**Percentages of Involvement with Community Agencies**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	ED Siblings
Family Court	40%	43%	30%	25%
Police Department	85%	53%	50%	10%
Protective Services	15%	23%	35%	15%
Social Services	43%	45%	53%	20%
Mental Health	20%	23%	63%	18%

Particularly interesting is that siblings of emotionally disturbed students had little involvement with these community agencies while the opposite is true for the siblings of socially maladjusted students. In short, at least in terms of involvement with judicial and mental health agencies, youth with social maladjustment and siblings show similarities whereas emotionally disturbed youth and siblings do not.

### ***Onset and Frequency of Problem Behaviors***

Another set of questions inquired about when problem behaviors were first noticed and their frequency. By eighth grade all of the emotionally disturbed youth exhibited problem behavior compared to just 30% of court schooled students ( $p < .001$ ). Seventy-five percent of the siblings of socially maladjusted youth are reported to have some problematic behavior compared to 55% for the siblings of emotionally disturbed youth. There were no significant differences in the settings—home, school, and community—in which problem behaviors first appeared for special education and court schooled students. Finally, as expected, the problems of emotionally disturbed students are rated as more chronic than those of socially maladjusted students. Emotionally disturbed students were reported to manifest behavior problems *most* or *all* of the time in 80% of the participants compared to 45% of court schooled participants (Chi-Square = 55.80,  $p < .001$ ).

**Parent Perception Scale Comparisons of SED and SM students**

Table 8 shows the means and standard deviations for the total scores on the Parent Perception Scale for emotionally disturbed and court schooled students and their rated siblings. A one-way ANOVA on these means was significant ( $F(3, 156) = 60.38, p < .001$ ). A Scheffe post-hoc test indicated that, as predicted, there were more internalizing behaviors for emotionally disturbed than socially maladjusted youth, and their profiles differed from their own siblings and the siblings of the socially maladjusted students.

**Table 8**  
**Total Scores on Parent Perception Scale for Emotionally Disturbed and Socially Maladjusted Students: Means, Standard Deviations**

	SM	SM Siblings	ED	SED Siblings
Socially Maladjusted (SM)			***	
87.98 (10.62)				
SM Siblings			***	
86.27 (13.41)				
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)	***	***		***
111.73 (16.20)				
ED Siblings			***	
84.68 (12.07)				

Standard Deviations in Parentheses

\*\*\* Scheffe test  $p < .001$

**Parent Perception Scale Comparisons of SED and SM students and their Siblings**

A  $t$  test for two independent samples was utilized to determine whether there was a significant difference between the emotionally disturbed students and siblings on Parent Perception Scale Factor 1 (Internalized Behaviors) and Factor 2 (Externalized Behaviors). The means for Factor 1 ( $M = 42.85$  and  $24.70$ , respectively) were significantly different ( $t = 10.31, p < .001$ ); the means for Factor 2 ( $M = 55.20$  and  $47.05$ , respectively) were significantly different ( $t = 4.55, p < .001$ ). Emotionally disturbed youth compared to a sibling are rated as showing more internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

A  $t$  test for two independent samples was utilized to determine whether a significant difference exists on Parent Perception Scale factors between parent ratings for socially maladjusted/conduct disordered students and their siblings. The means for target student and sibling did not significantly differ on Factor 1 ( $M = 29.32$  and  $27.10$ , respectively) or Factor 2 ( $M = 41.95$  and  $43.82$ , respectively).

**Discussion**

This research attempted to examine factors that theoretically could differentiate emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted students in light of United States special education legislation that requires this differentiation but provides no criteria for differentiation. Most of the previous research on this issue has studied educator rather than parental ratings (Cole, 1990; Costenbader & Buntaine, 1999), and indeed the law does not require parental data as part of the differentiation process. However, not including parent ratings in this process would seem to be a serious omission given that these emotional conditions often are influenced by familial dynamics and parenting issues (Rutter, 1985). Accordingly, this research sought to develop a measure that might help differentiate

these two groups of students even though we were sensitive to the fact that students in classes for the emotionally disturbed and students being educated in the judicial system share many characteristics in common. Based on a literature underscoring the importance of home and environment factors, learning histories, chronicity versus situationally specific behaviors, and differential pathways of problem onset we based our assessment on parent ratings and, for comparative purposes, also asked about a sibling's behavior. The present scale, although clearly a work in progress, demonstrated adequate test characteristics, and is easy to score and administer. Further validation studies are needed to determine the usefulness of the measure in differentiating students with these behavioral characteristics who are not in special education and court programs. The scale differentiated between mothers' ratings of special education and court-schooled students' internalizing behaviors, (feelings of anxiety, persecution, depression, loneliness, frustration, overly critical of self, etc.) and externalizing behaviors (aggression, acting out, destructive acts, etc.). Emotionally disturbed students manifested internalizing behaviors to a greater degree than other groups assessed. If anything, the internalizing-externalizing dimension appears to hold the most promise for the identification of emotionally disturbed students (e.g., Clarizio, 1987; 1992; Clarizio & Higgins, 1988; Clarizio & Klein, 1995; Terrasi, Sennett, & Macklin, 1999). Emotionally disturbed students' internalizing behaviors impacts on social skills and influences educational outcomes (Knoff, 1995; Nelson, Rutherford, Center, & Walker, 1991; Terrasi, Sennett, & Macklin, 1999).

We acknowledge that by specifically sampling from community court schools whose placement depends upon probation violation or conviction of a crime we risked skewing the socially maladjusted/conduct disorder sample in such a way that we increased the likelihood of mothers' reporting aggressive and externalizing behaviors. However, it was felt that the sample chosen closely matched the literature descriptions of those with the label of social maladjustment (e.g., willful rule breaking and authority defiance). Nevertheless, youth whose actions result in a criminal charge may represent a unique group and rating this group may bias these results. Similarly, there may be bias in the ratings of youth who continue in a special education program into mid-adolescence. Informal inspection of individual items of the Parent Perception Scale suggested that there is little difference in the threatening behaviors exhibited by the special education and court samples. The former students, however, are more likely to have threatened to hurt themselves or destroyed property without an apparent reason than are the latter students.

Similarly, sampling procedures may have influenced the number of socially maladjusted students involved with the criminal justice system and emotionally disturbed students involved with the mental health system. Research has indicated that nearly 60% of incarcerated youth with special education eligibility are label as emotionally disturbed (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), and similarly this study found that both emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth were involved with the criminal justice system. Similarly, about 20% of emotionally disturbed students commit crimes (Wagner, Newman, D'Amico, Jay, Bulter-Nalin, Marder, & Cox, 1991). Many students with a criminal justice history may be evidencing both emotional disturbance and social maladjustment (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Nelson et al., 1991). Thus, we would not argue that criminal history, in itself, should be used to exclude students from special education services as emotionally disturbed.

It was not surprising that we found that emotionally disturbed students received community-based mental health services. Such services often are recommended in California and other locales by

multidisciplinary teams that have designated mental health services as a *designated instructional service* providing outpatient therapy, medication monitoring, etc on an individual education plan. Some emotionally disturbed students have psychiatric histories. However, many youth in psychiatric hospitals have had no involvement in special education (Forness, 1992; Forness, et al., 1993; McGinnis & Forness, 1988) and therefore psychiatric history cannot be used as a primary indicant of emotional disturbance.

In examining mothers' reports of problem behavior onset, clear differences the groups were seen. The majority of the emotionally disturbed students show early onset; by contrast, it is during the late middle school or high school years that many (30%) of socially maladjusted students' problem behaviors first occur. This is an important finding for at least two reasons. First, it suggests the strong influence of peers on the shaping and reinforcement of social maladjustment behaviors (Cohen, Adler, & Beck, 1986). Second, it underscores the importance, as argued, of obtaining parent data as part of the overall evaluation process because only parents are likely to have access to this developmental information. Perhaps because comprehensive parental views have not been used to differentiate emotional disturbance and social maladjustment, age of onset has not been widely used as a differentiating factor among these populations (Clarizio & Klein, 1995). Future studies are needed to more fully determine the role of age of onset as a differentiating factor between emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted adolescents. Further, because early onset problematic behaviors generally do not improve with time it is important that emotionally disturbed students be identified early and provided with interventions directly related to the problematic behaviors (Kazdin, 1985; Richman, Stevenson, & Graham, 1982; Robins, 1981; Webster-Stratton, 1993).

A widely held view is that youth with behavioral and psychiatric problems have poor family histories (Rutter, 1985). Our data supported this notion. The FACES III showed that less than a quarter of families sampled show balanced adaptability and cohesion, and these data indicated that the socially maladjusted students' families showed high disengagement (a high degree of independence). These families are described as experiencing separateness rather than closeness, and limited attachment and/or commitment (Olson, 1986). Compared to the families of emotionally disturbed youth, the families of socially maladjusted youth are larger and comprised of a single parent. An interesting informal result was that approximately one out of four families of socially maladjusted youth declined participation in this research. In doing so, several mothers stated about their sons, *I can't do anything with him, nobody else can and I don't want to talk to anybody about him*. One may speculate that by the time we questioned these mothers they had already lost control over their children's behavior, and they may have been frustrated over children in their family with behavior problems as well. Alternatively, the mothers interviewed may have been so frustrated by the target child's behavior that they were overly sensitive to behavioral irregularities in other children in the household. The latter, if true, would serve to bias these findings and is a question for further study.

By contrast, these data showed that the families of the emotionally disturbed are rated as showing high interdependence or *enmeshment* (Olson, 1986). One interpretation is that, within these families, the emotionally disturbed youth may experience processes that increase or maintain their dependency, thus preventing the development of social and interpersonal skills, particularly in comparison to a sibling, thus, underscoring the potential importance of family-based interventions for these youth.

Because this research is considered preliminary and considerable further refinement of the Parent Perception Scale is needed, we cannot resolve the ongoing and lively debate regarding whether or

not emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted youth can or should be differentiated. The findings do, however, underscore the importance of considering parental and familial variables in this discussion as long as federal law mandates the social maladjustment exclusion. Further, the data presented relative to problem onset and type, and family dynamics should be useful to those planning appropriate strategies and interventions, particularly early parental and home intervention. Several areas of additional research are needed. These include validation studies using social maladjusted populations without a history of aggressive behavior, interviews provided by fathers as well as mothers, and standardization with other special education groups for comparative purposes.

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## Appendix A Parent Perception Scale

### *Phone Introduction*

I am calling to gather some information that will aid school personnel in being better to understand and able to educate your child. The questions will be divided into three parts. Part One will ask for some general background information regarding your family. Part Two will look at some possible behaviors your child may be doing. The questions in this part will be answered by you giving a description of your child's behaviors, giving a specific answer to the questions, or selecting one answer from a list of three or five possible answers. Part Three will ask about your thoughts and feelings regarding your family. Thank you for taking a few minutes to answer some questions regarding your son (daughter).

### *Part One: Demographic Information*

Child's name \_\_\_\_\_ Date of birth \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_  
Residing with: Parent(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Foster parent(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Family marital status:

Intact \_\_\_\_ Single parent \_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_  
Stepmother \_\_\_\_ Stepfather \_\_\_\_

Number, names, and ages of children in home:

Birth order of (target child):

Have any members of your immediate family been involved with any of the following agencies? If yes, who, and which agency?

Family court \_\_\_\_ Department of Social Services \_\_\_\_

Police Department \_\_\_\_ Mental Health \_\_\_\_ Child Protective Services \_\_\_\_

### *Part Two: Ratings of Child Behavior*

1. Describe the problem(s) (child) is currently experiencing?
2. When was the problem first noted? Before preschool \_\_\_\_  
Preschool \_\_\_\_ Grades 1-2 \_\_\_\_ Grades 3-4 \_\_\_\_ Grades 7-8 \_\_\_\_ Grades 9-11 \_\_\_\_
3. In which of the following places does (child) manifest the behavior(s)?  
At home \_\_\_\_ At school \_\_\_\_ In the community \_\_\_\_
4. Does this problem behavior(s) occur:  
Occasionally \_\_\_\_ Most of the time \_\_\_\_ All the time \_\_\_\_

The following questions require the respondent to indicate a response using a 5-point scale with anchors of almost never, once in a while, sometimes, frequently, and almost always. Scale numbers are reversed for each item.

Letters at end indicate if item loads on internalizing (I), externalizing (E), or combined (C) factor.

5. To what extent does (the child) complain about being teased by his (her) friends? (I)
6. To what extent does (the child) accept responsibility for his (her) behavior? (E)
7. To what extent is (the child) overly critical of himself (herself)? (I)
8. To what extent does (the child) do similar activities of his/her friends? (E)
9. To what extent does (the child) behave in ways you don't expect?. [If almost never, skip item 10 and go to item 11].
10. How often do these unexpected behaviors affect school attendance?
11. How often does (the child) threaten to hurt others who get in his (her) way? (I)
12. How often does (the child) try to hurt himself/herself when upset? (C)

**Appendix A cont'd**

13. To what extent is (the child) pressured by others to do things he/she doesn't want to do? (I)
  14. To what extent is (the child) easily frustrated? (I)
  15. How often does (the child) become aggressive when upset, frustrated, or in a conflict situation? (I)
  16. To what extent does (the child) get in trouble in the community with friends?
  17. To what extent does (the child) get in trouble in the community by himself/herself?
  18. How often does (the child) pretend to be sick to miss school?
  19. How often does (the child) need reminding to change clothes or bathe?
  20. How often does (the child) say things that don't make sense to you? (I)
  21. How often does (the child) hang around with the opposite sex?
  22. How often does (the child) have a girlfriend (or boyfriend)? (E)
  23. When (the child) misses school because of being sick, how often is the illness real? (E)
  24. How often does (the child) appear sad or depressed? (I)
  25. When (the child) appears sad or depressed, how often is it because of a specific reason? (C)
  26. To what extent does (the child) participate in group activities? (C)
  27. How often does (the child) prefer to be alone rather than with others? (C)
  28. How often does (the child) appear anxious or nervous for no apparent reason? (I)
  29. To what extent does (the child) learn from his/her mistakes? (I)
  30. How often does (the child) disobey you? (I)
  31. To your knowledge, how involved is (the child) with a gang?
  32. How often does (the child) destroy things without apparent reason? (I)
  33. How often does (the child) lie to get out of trouble? (E)
  34. How often does (the child) run away to avoid punishment?
  35. To what extent does (the child) yell or cry easily when mad? (I)
- [Questions 36-41 require the respondent to indicate a response using a 3-point scale with anchors of none, some, and most. Scale numbers are reversed for each item. Question 42 requires a choice between less than two weeks, two to four weeks, and a month or more. Letters at end indicate if item loads on internalizing (I), externalizing (E), or combination factor (C).]
36. How many of (the child's) friends are his/her same age? (I)
  37. How many of (the child's) friends are more than a year younger?
  38. How many of (the child's) friends are more than a year older?
  39. To your knowledge, in a month, how often does (the child) drink alcohol? (E)
  40. To your knowledge, in a month, how often does (the child) use street drugs such as marijuana, PCP, crack, and cocaine? (I)
  41. To what extent, has (the child) been in trouble with the law? (C). [If more than once ask how many times? \_\_\_\_]
  42. When (the child) says he/she wants to change their behavior for the better, for how long is he/she able to change? (I)

**Part Three: Open-ended Items**

43. Of all your children, which ones are most similar to (the child)? Why and in what ways?
44. Is there anything else about your child that would be helpful for me to know?
45. To what degree do you feel confident about your knowledge of the child?