General Characteristics

Behavior rating scales such as the SSBS-2 and HCSBS provide a standardized format for the development of summary judgments about a child or adolescent’s behavior characteristics. These judgments are made by an informant who knows the child well. In the case of the HCSBS, the informant should be a parent, guardian, caregiver, or supervisor. With the SSBS-2, the informant or rater should be a teacher or other educator who knows the student well.

As an assessment methodology, behavior rating scales are less direct than either direct behavioral observation or structured behavioral interviewing because they are measures of perceptions regarding specified behaviors rather than firsthand measures of the behavior. Rating scales, however, are considered to be a direct and objective assessment method and to yield data that are more reliable than either unstructured clinical interviewing or projective techniques (Merrell, 2008). When behavior rating scales began to become more widely used during the 1970s and 1980s, they were often viewed with suspicion and used as a last resort by behaviorally oriented clinicians, but as the research base has increased and technical characteristics have improved, their use has been more broadly accepted. This increased acceptance has occurred as a result of improvements in the evidence base for using behavior rating scales and not just because of a shift in professional opinion.

Conners and Werry (1979) defined rating scales as an “algebraic summation, over variable periods of time and numbers of social situations, of many discrete observations” [p. 341]. The term algebraic indicates that for each rating scale item, various rating choices are available, each of which symbolize a particular level of behavior. An additive checklist, on the other hand, is a list of symptoms or characteristics that the rater checks if present and then obtains a total score of the number of items checked. In general, the algebraic format provided by rating scales is preferred to the simple additive format provided by checklists because it allows for more precise measurement of behavioral frequency or intensity.


**Advantages**

The widespread popularity of using behavior rating scales is not incidental because these tools offer many advantages for clinicians and researchers who conduct child and adolescent behavioral assessments. The main advantages of behavior rating scales that have been proposed by Merrell (2000a, 2000b, 2008) are summarized as follows:

- In comparison with direct behavioral observation and behavioral interviewing of parents and teachers, behavior rating scales are less expensive in terms of professional time involved and amount of training required to utilize the assessment system.

- Behavior rating scales are capable of providing information on low frequency but important behaviors that might not be seen in direct observation sessions. An example that serves to illustrate this point is a physical attack by one child toward another. In most cases, this type of behavior does not occur on a constant or consistent schedule and might be missed within the constraints of conducting two brief observations. Nonetheless, to know about the occurrence of such behaviors is extremely important.

- As mentioned previously, behavior rating scales are an objective assessment method that provides data that are more reliable and valid than the information provided by unstructured interviews or projective-expressive techniques.

- Behavior rating scales may be used to assess children and youth who cannot readily provide reliable or detailed information about themselves.

- Rating scales capitalize on observations over a period of time in a child or adolescent’s natural environment (e.g., the school and home settings). Any experienced clinician understands that there are problems associated with making a single observation of a child or youth in an environment that is unusual to him or her, such as a clinic or office. Younger children are especially reactive to novel surroundings and their environments in general, and the behavior that they may exhibit in a single session in an unfamiliar setting may not be very representative of their behavior in general.

- Rating scales capitalize on the judgments and observations of individuals who are highly familiar with the child or adolescent’s behavior, such as parents or teachers. These informants are thus considered to be “experts” in their ability to describe a child’s behavior, and the information that they provide is usually critical to the assessment process.

Because of these advantages, it is easy to see why rating scales are widely used—they get at the “big picture” in a short amount of time, at moderate cost, and with a substantial amount of validity.
Problems

Despite their many advantages, rating scales have some potential problems. The most sophisticated rating scales available can help provide objective, reliable, and socially valid information, but the nature of rating scale technology has some inherent shortcomings.

The measurement problems of behavior rating scales can be grouped into two classes: bias of response and error variance. Bias of response refers to the way that informants completing the rating scales may create additional error by the way in which they use the scales. Response bias has three specific types: 1) halo effects, rating a child in a positive manner because he or she possesses some other positive characteristic not pertinent to the rated item; 2) leniency or severity effects, the tendency of some raters to have an overly generous or overly critical response set for all of their ratings; and 3) central tendency effects, the tendency of raters to select mid-point ratings and to avoid endpoints of the scale such as “never” or “always.”

Error variance is closely related to and often overlaps with response bias as a form of rating scale measurement problems but provides a more general representation of some of the problems encountered with this form of assessment. Four types of variance that may create error in the obtained results of a rating scale assessment have been identified. Source variance refers to the subjectivity of the rater. Setting variance occurs as a result of the situational specificity of behavior, given that humans tend to behave somewhat differently across situations and settings. Temporal variance refers to the tendency of behavior ratings to be only moderately consistent over time—partly due to changes in the observed behavior over time and partly due to changes in the rater’s approach to the rating task over time. Finally, instrument variance refers to the fact that different rating scales measure often related but slightly different hypothetical constructs (e.g., aggressive behavior vs. delinquent behavior), and a severe problem behavior score on one scale may be compared with only a moderate problem behavior score on a differing rating scale for the same person. Related to instrument variance is the fact that differing assessment tools have their own unique norming samples with which to make score comparisons. If these samples are not representative of the population as a whole, similar scores on two different rating scales may not mean the same thing.

Recommended Practices

Problems associated with using behavior rating scales can be minimized in several ways. Four specific recommended ways of using rating scales, which have been previously proposed by the author of the SSBS-2 (Merrell, 2000a, 2008), are discussed next.

1. Use behavior rating scales routinely for early screening and identification. Effective screening practices involve identifying with a high degree of accuracy children or youth who are in the early stages of developing behavior,
social, or emotional problems. The identified children are then evaluated more carefully to determine whether their social behavior problems warrant special program eligibility and intervention services. Screening for social behavior problems is usually done for the purpose of secondary prevention, which is the prevention of the existing problem becoming worse (Kauffman, 2000). Screening for early intervention is one of the best uses of behavior rating scales, as they cover a wide variety of important behaviors and take very little time to administer and score.

2. Use the aggregation principle.
This principle involves obtaining ratings from a variety of sources, each of which might present a slightly different picture. When using rating scales for purposes other than routine screening, obtaining aggregated rating scale data is recommended in order to reduce bias of response and variance problems in the assessment. In practice, using aggregated measures means to obtain rating evaluations from different raters in different settings and to use more than one type of rating scale.

3. Use a multimethod, multisource, multisetting assessment design.
When behavior rating scales are used for formal assessment and decision-making purposes rather than initial screening purposes, they should be used only as one part of a comprehensive assessment design. The same could be said for any other method of child behavioral assessment, whether it be direct behavioral observation, interviews, sociometric techniques, or something else. Because each method of behavioral assessment is subject to certain limitations, it is always best to use a combination of methods, across settings, and with a variety of informant sources to help to obtain a comprehensive picture of the child’s functioning and to overcome the limitations of any single method, source, or setting. This type of design has been referred to previously as a multimethod, multisource, multisetting assessment design (Merrell, 2008).

4. Use behavior rating scales to monitor intervention progress and outcome.
Kerr and Nelson (1989) demonstrated that continuous assessment and monitoring of student progress following the initial assessment and intervention is very important in successful implementation of behavioral interventions. Progress toward behavioral intervention goals may be assessed easily on a weekly or biweekly schedule using appropriate rating scales. Frequent formative assessment of this type is consistent with the increasingly popular response-to-intervention methods of assessing and supporting students. Although rating scales may not be the best measurement choice for gathering daily assessment data, there are a number of other simple ways of assessing progress daily, such as using performance records or brief observational data.

Additional assessment following the intervention can also be a useful process. The main reason for follow-up assessment is to determine how well the intervention effects have been maintained over time (e.g., after 3 months) and how well the behavior changes have generalized to other settings (e.g., the classroom, playground, cafeteria).
home setting and other classrooms). In actual practice, a follow-up assessment might involve having teacher(s) and parent(s) complete behavior rating scales on a child after a specified time period has elapsed following the child’s participation in a social skills training program. The data obtained from this follow-up assessment can be used to determine whether follow-up interventions seem appropriate. They may also be useful in developing future intervention programs if social-behavioral gains are not being maintained over time or generalized across specific settings.

**SUMMARY**

The SSBS-2 is a unique and practical behavior rating scale designed to be used for screening and assessment of social competence and antisocial behavior of children and youth ages 5–18. This instrument was designed specifically for use by teachers and other school-based raters such as administrators, counselors, and so forth. The SSBS-2 is a companion instrument to the HCSBS, which is similar to the SSBS-2 but designed to be used by parents and other home- or community-based raters. Together, the SSBS-2 and HCSBS provide a comprehensive cross-informant system of screening and assessment for evaluating social competence and antisocial behavior of children and youth. The SSBS-2 items, scales, and subscales were developed based on specific theories of social and antisocial behavior. Like all behavior rating scales, the SSBS-2 should be used within the constraints of its advantages and limitations. The remaining chapters of this manual provide specific instructions for administering, scoring, and interpreting the SSBS-2 (Chapters 2 and 3), as well as detailed information on the development, standardization, and technical properties of this instrument (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).
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