Interpretation and Expectation in Childhood Anxiety Disorders: Age Effects and Social Specificity


120 children (ages 7-12 years old) with and without anxiety disorders participated in a multi-method study aimed at evaluating group differences related to negative thinking styles across the developmental period. Results revealed relatively few differences in thinking styles between anxious and non-anxious children in middle childhood. However, older anxious children perceived less ability to cope with potentially challenging situations than non-anxious children.

- Contrary to expectations, there were no differences between anxious and non-anxious children related to threat interpretation at any age.
- Older (10-12 year old) anxious children anticipated lower levels of perceived coping than non-anxious children.
- There was little support for the cognitive content specificity hypothesis, the idea that there would be increased cognitive distortions related to social contexts for socially anxious but not non-socially anxious children.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could incorporate content in their curricula to enhance children’s confidence and positive expectations about their ability to cope with challenging or stressful situations (e.g., a parent’s deployment).
- Programs could work with parents to identify children who may be particularly concerned about their ability to cope with a Service member’s absence. Program staff could teach parents about how to effectively support their children surrounding these issues.

Implications for Policies:

- The mental health status of Service members’ children could be routinely monitored in order to allow for early identification and intervention for mental health concerns.
- Policies could recommend outreach and services to strengthen resilience among Service members and their children, helping them successfully manage challenges associated with deployment and other stressors.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could include a broader range of anxiety disorder-relevant tasks, evaluate additional types of cognitive distortions, or assess changes in cognitive styles related to treatment.
- Future research could identify developmental factors that contribute to lower perceived control among older anxious children compared to younger anxious children.

Prepared by the Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
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Methodology:
- Children referred to a children's anxiety clinic and healthy community volunteer children (and their parents) completed a multi-method study.
- Participants completed 1) diagnostic interviews, 2) surveys about psychological characteristics (e.g., anxiety, behavioral problems) and expectations regarding social and non-social challenge tasks, and 3) ambiguous hypothetical and "in vivo" laboratory tasks.
- Multivariate analyses of covariance were used to evaluate group differences in threat and coping (i.e., negative emotions and perceived control) related to the ambiguous and in vivo tasks.

Participants:
- 120 British children aged 7-12 participated in the study; 80 children referred to a child anxiety clinic (40 diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, 40 with another anxiety disorder), and 40 non-referred children (no anxiety disorder).
- 53% girls; primarily White (>73% across groups).
- Most (70%) of the referred (anxious) children had comorbid diagnoses.

Limitations:
- High rates of comorbid mood and behavioral disorders increase ecological validity but may obscure group differences in cognitive distortions specifically related to anxiety.
- The data are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to draw causal conclusions about changes in cognitive styles across middle childhood.
- The study included a relatively small sample of primarily White, British children, limiting generalizability.

Assessing Research that Works

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Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating: ✭✭✭