



Child and Parent Factors That Impact Child Anxiety

A considerable body of research has identified various child and parent factors that contribute to and maintain anxiety symptoms in children.

Yet relatively few studies have examined child factors (including threat-based cognitive bias, neuroticism, gender, puberty and age) as well as parent factors (including maternal anxiety and child-rearing style) and the extent to which these factors serve as predictors of child anxiety.

A Griffith University team in Queensland set out to examine the extent to which child and parent factors are uniquely associated with child anxiety symptoms. They also set out to determine whether associations of child factors

(which included child neuroticism and cognitive bias) with child anxiety were indirect via maternal rearing behaviour.

The participants were a large sample of children between 7 and 12 years of age with varying levels of anxiety, including those with diagnosed anxiety disorders. Data were collected from both children and parents, and age, gender and pubertal status were also considered.

KEY FINDINGS

- Parental anxiety is a significant risk factor for child anxiety, given the higher than expected incidence rates of anxiety in parents of anxious children, compared to the general population.
- Mothers who self-reported more trait anxiety had children with higher levels of self-reported anxiety symptoms.
- Mothers' anxious child-rearing and over-protection were associated with elevated child anxiety symptoms.

- Child temperament characterized by high levels of arousal and emotionality may evoke child-rearing behaviours from mothers focused on minimising potential risk exposure and harm, which in turn, could elevate anxiety symptoms.
- Early maturing girls experience more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and these symptoms are more stable over a subsequent four-year period than in normally maturing girls.
- Pubertal stage is considered a more powerful predictor of girls' internalising symptoms and disorders than chronological age and in comparison with boys.
- Children were more anxious when they were reported to be more advanced in pubertal status by their parents, when they had a tendency to interpret more threats in ambiguous situations, and when they self-reported more neuroticism.

- ✓ Make sure your kids know how and where to contact you in an emergency – not every five minutes.
- ✓ Ensure everyone has a good night's sleep and that healthy family nutrition is a top priority.
- ✓ Parent from the heart, rather than parenting from online advice and the myriad of books on how to be a 'super' parent.

Source: Waters, et al., Journal of Anxiety Disorders 26 (2012) pp737-745.



THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Chill out more often. Make time for yourself and time for your kids. Take a long walk together, visit a bookshop or library where kids can relax without having to talk).
- ✓ As a family, practise relaxation techniques (deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, exercise, visualisation, laughing, stretching, dancing, listening to music, singing, reading together, meditating together).
- ✓ Reassess your parenting style. Are you a helicopter parent or in danger of becoming one?
- ✓ Keep screen time to a minimum, especially if your child is excitable or easily agitated.
- ✓ Encourage age-appropriate independence – and not just for your kids. You need time out to be as independent of them as they are of you.
- ✓ Talk often about fears and how they can, in many cases, be unfounded.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
FOUNDER, YOU CAN DO IT! EDUCATION

If we are significantly anxious about our parenting, overprotective, over-nurturing or constantly worried about perceived threats to our kids, we run the risk of our kids becoming anxious and fearful as a result. If our kids happen to be prone to symptoms of anxiety and neuroticism, over-protective parenting can serve to reinforce their fears. The onus is on us, as parents and adults, to consciously try to monitor our own stress levels, to help our kids with theirs.