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Familial correlates of social anxiety in children and adolescents

Susan M. Bögels^{a,*}, Annemarie van Oosten^b, Peter Muris^a, Dianne Smulders^b

^a *Department of Medical, Clinical, and Experimental Psychology, University of Maastricht, PO Box 616, 6200 Maastricht, The Netherlands*

^b *Student Mental Health Sciences, University of Maastricht, Maastricht, The Netherlands*

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Abstract

Retrospective studies suggest a relationship between parental rearing practices and social phobia. The present study investigated whether socially anxious children perceive their current parental rearing as rejecting, overprotective, and lacking emotional warmth, and as emphasizing the importance of other's opinion, and de-emphasizing social initiatives and family sociability. Furthermore, we examined whether parents of socially anxious children report to rely on such rearing practices, and suffer themselves from social fears. A regression analysis as well as extreme group comparisons were applied. Little support was found for the presumed role of the assessed family rearing aspects in the development of social anxiety in children. Solely family sociability (children's and mothers' report) and children's perception of overprotection of the mother predicted social anxiety in the regression analysis. Given the influence of the mentioned rearing practices, social anxiety of the mother still significantly predicted social anxiety of the child. In the extreme group comparisons, differences in the expected direction were found between socially anxious and normal children on parental rejection, emotional warmth, and family sociability. However, the lack of differences between socially anxious and clinical control children suggests that these variables do not form a specific pathway to social fears. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

There are at least two reasons why there is considerable interest in the contribution of family upbringing to the etiology of social phobia. First, the mean age of onset of social phobia is early

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bogels@dep.unimaas.nl (S.M. Bögels).

(estimates vary between 15.7 (SD=8.5) and 20.0 year (SD=8.3) (Öst, 1987)), so many social phobics develop this disorder during the years in which their family still has an important influence. Secondly, the family is the first place where people learn social behavior and where they develop schemes about themselves as social beings, based on their interactions with primary care-takers.

Although there is considerable evidence for the genetic transmission of social anxiety or shyness (Plomin & Daniels, 1986), the evidence for familial environmental influences is also thought to be strong. A full adoption study of Daniels and Plomin (1985) revealed that social anxiety seems to be mediated by both genetic and environmental influences. Mother's self-reports of their shyness and sociability were significantly related to infant shyness, not only in non-adoptive homes, in which genetics and family environment are shared, but also in adoptive homes, in which family environment but not heredity is shared. Lack of exposure to novel social situations might be the mechanism: shy and unsociable mothers expose neither themselves nor their infants to such experiences. Environmental factors associated with social anxiety of children, in the same study, were lack of family cohesion, and lack of involvement of the family in social activities. In line with this, Bruch (1989) assumed three parental practices that may foster social fears: (1) parents' concern with other people's evaluation; (2) parents' social isolation of the child; and (3) lack of family sociability. Bruch, Heimberg, Berger and Collins (1989) found that social phobic adults, compared to agoraphobic adults, perceived their parents as seeking to isolate them, as overemphasizing the opinion of others, and as de-emphasizing family sociability. Moreover, social phobics perceived their mothers as more often avoiding social situations than did agoraphobics.

Another parenting behavior that may foster social anxiety is parental evaluation. Being exposed to negative feedback might well make children hypersensitive for negative evaluation by others. Alessandri and Lewis (1993) produced evidence for this idea. They studied the interaction between parents and their 3-year-old children during performance tasks. Negative evaluations and lack of positive evaluations by the parents were associated with children's expression of shame. Moreover, a longitudinal study of Allaman, Joyce and Crandell (1972) showed that parenting practices that convey rejection may instill a preoccupation with others' evaluative remarks. In a similar vein, Arrindell, Emmelkamp, Monsma and Brilman (1983) reported that social phobic adults perceived both their parents as rejecting. Rejection was measured by the *Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran* (EMBU), a questionnaire developed to assess perceived parental rearing practices (Perris, Jacobsson, Lindstöm, Von Knorring & Perris, 1980).

Other rearing behaviors that have been connected to the development of social anxiety are lack of emotional warmth and overprotection. Emotional warmth consists of physical and verbal acceptance and physical and mental availability of the parents (Castro, Toro, Van der Ende & Arrindell, 1993). It is thought to contribute to a positive self-image, and, as such, to protect against excessive social anxiety (Klonsky, Dutton & Liebel, 1988). When parents impede their child's autonomy or isolate the child from experiences with the environment, this is called overprotection. Overprotection might be related to social anxiety through various pathways: the child might not be able to develop social skills because it's own initiative is discouraged, or because it is isolated from social experiences. Or, when parents react overprotective or rejecting to autonomous behavior of the child, the child learns to associate independence with shame/anxiety (Nathason, 1992). The studies of Parker (1979) and Arrindell et al. (1983) both showed that social phobics perceived their parents as overprotective, and as lacking emotional warmth.

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