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The relationship between parenting factors and trait anxiety: Mediating role of cognitive errors and metacognition

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Abstract

Research examining parenting factors in the development of anxiety has focused largely on the concepts of parental warmth and overcontrolling or intrusive parenting, This study investigated the relationship between these factors, and also parental discipline style and anxiety using self-report methodology with a sample of 16–18 year olds. In order to try to explain the relationship between parenting and anxiety, measures of cognition were also included. A multiple regression was conducted including all parenting factors as predictors of trait anxiety. The regression was a modest fit ($R^2 = 22\%$) and the model was significant ($F(4, 141) = 9.90$, $p < 0.0001$). Only the effect of Over-reactivity was significant, ($t = 3.72$, $p < 0.0001$). Furthermore, Over-reactive discipline was significantly associated with increased cognitive distortions ($r = 0.361$ $p < 0.0001$) and metacognition ($r = 0.396$ $p < 0.0001$). Both cognitive distortions and metacognition were found to partially mediate the relationship between discipline style and trait anxiety. The implications of these findings and areas for future research are discussed.
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Keywords: Trait anxiety; Parenting; Discipline styles; Metacognition; Cognitive distortions

1. Introduction

Parenting has been the focus of much of the research into the development of childhood anxiety disorders and features prominently in many of the models proposed to explain their development in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Manassis & Bradley, 1994; Rubin & Mills, 1991). This focus has arisen, in part, because of the evidence that anxiety is aggregated through families. Parents of clinically anxious children are more than twice as likely as parents of control children to have a diagnosable anxiety disorder. What is more, parents of children with externalizing problems have rates of anxiety disorder closer to that of parents of controls, indicating the specific heritability of anxiety, (Last, Hersen, Kazdin, Orvaschel, & Perrin, 1991). The children of anxiety disordered parents have also been found to have significantly higher rates of anxiety disorders, with these children being reported to be seven times more likely to receive a diagnosis, (Turner, Beidel, & Costello, 1987). A review of behavioral genetics research employing twin samples indicates clearly that there is a genetic influence on childhood anxiety. However, it accounts for approximately one third of the variance, (Eley, 2001). The review also concluded that shared environment and individual specific factors contribute significantly to the heritability of anxiety in childhood and adolescence. As

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parents are the primary influence on a child's environment, much of the research investigating the development of childhood anxiety has focused on parenting styles and behaviors.

1.1. Care and Control: the most important parenting constructs?

The majority of the extant research into the role of parenting in the etiology and maintenance of anxiety has focused on the concepts of Care and Control. Care refers to how warm and accepting parents are towards their child and Control refers to the limits that parents set for their child and how much they intrude in activities that the child is capable of undertaking independently. The focus on these two concepts is due, in part, to the prominence of the attachment literature, which suggests that insecure-resistant attachment, characterized by over involvement in combination with rejecting or inconsistent care giving, is associated with anxiety, (Bowlby, 1982). The link between insecure resistant attachment status in early childhood, and anxiety in late adolescence has been demonstrated longitudinally (Warren, Huston, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997), providing strong support for the importance of over involved and rejecting or inconsistent care giving. The development of the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) a retrospective measure of perceived parental care and control, was developed from the attachment literature, and facilitated research into these constructs. Numerous retrospective self-report studies using the PBI (and equivalent tools) have shown anxious adults to report their parenting as more controlling and less warm, (see Gerlsma, Emmelkamp, & Arrindell, 1990 for a review).

1.2. Parental discipline styles and childhood anxiety

A review of parenting factors and internalizing disorders by Rapee (1997) suggests that factor analysis indicates *three* robust parenting factors: Care; Control; and discipline style. However, discipline style as a parenting factor has been largely ignored in populations with internalizing disorders. A small body of research has recently emerged, suggesting that parental discipline styles may be an important factor in the maintenance of anxiety disorders. In particular, the reduction of harsh and punitive discipline styles in standard behavioral parent training groups has been shown to reduce symptoms of internalizing problems as effectively as it reduces externalizing problems (Cartwright-Hatton, McNally, White, & Verduyn, 2005). Furthermore, a pilot study found that a behavioral parent training group aimed at reducing harsh and inconsistent discipline, successfully reduced anxiety in a clinically anxious sample of young children (Cartwright-Hatton, McNally, & White, 2005). Therefore, it appears that the relationship between parental discipline styles and anxiety warrants further attention.

Inconsistent and harsh discipline behaviors have previously received little attention in relation to internalizing problems. However, a generally inconsistent style of parenting has been postulated as important in both the attachment literature (Bowlby, 1982) and Chorpita and Barlow's (1998) model of the development of anxiety. Chorpita and Barlow suggest that inconsistent parenting responses lead to a decreased sense of mastery and control, as the child cannot reliably elicit a positive or negative response from their parent. This leads to a belief that they have little control over their environment. In support of this contention, inconsistent parenting behavior has been found to be associated with anxiety in a correlational study (Kohlman, Schumacher, and Streit, 1988). Additionally, we hypothesize that harsh and punitive responses may have a similar negative influence on the child's beliefs about themselves and their capabilities. It is, therefore, theoretically plausible that inconsistent and harsh responses in discipline situations, may be just as important to children with anxiety as those with behavioral difficulties (Webster-Stratton, 1998).

Clinically, a link between discipline styles and anxiety would be an important finding. Two studies, (Cartwright-Hatton, McNally, & White, 2005; Cartwright-Hatton, McNally, White, et al., 2005), make use of existing behavioral parent training technologies to instill gentle and consistent discipline styles in parents of children with internalizing symptoms. These techniques have traditionally been used with parents of children with externalizing problems, where they have met with great success (Webster-Stratton, 1998). These (and similar) parenting programs provide parents with clear, well-operationalized strategies directed at managing specific behaviors, rather than trying to address broader parenting style constructs, such as care and control. This is a significant advantage for delivery. Evidence-based technologies to address parenting that is controlling or lacking in warmth do not currently exist; therefore, an association between anxiety and parental discipline styles could have useful theoretical and clinical implications.

The present study examined the relationship between anxiety and parental warmth, control and discipline

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