



PII S0272-7358(97)00010-X

## AN INFORMATION-PROCESSING PERSPECTIVE ON CHILDHOOD ANXIETY

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the past decade, cognitive theories of adult anxiety disorders have become increasingly complex, reflecting enhanced understanding of anxiety-related information-processing. This growth has fostered the development and enhancement of numerous assessment and treatment methods. Unfortunately, similar growth has been slower to occur in theories of childhood anxiety. This paper attempts to foster such growth by adopting an information-processing perspective. Doing so expands the extant cognitive perspective on childhood anxiety in four major ways. First, the division of cognitive processing into a sequence of steps provides a framework for organizing predictions regarding cognitive factors in childhood anxiety. Second, consideration of the cognitive operations active during each stage in the sequence facilitates elaboration of the types of cognitive deficits and distortions characteristic of anxious children. Third, it promotes development and application of performance-based assessment methodologies. Finally, an information-processing perspective highlights several targets for clinical intervention that may promote widespread change in an anxiety-supporting cognitive system. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd*

OVER THE past decade, cognitive theories of adult anxiety disorders have become increasingly complex, reflecting enhanced understanding of anxiety-related information-processing (cf. Barlow, 1988; Beck & Emery, 1985; Foa & Kozak, 1991; Ingram & Kendall, 1987; Mathews & MacLeod, 1994). These increasingly detailed theories have fostered development and enhancement of numerous assessment and treatment methods. Unfortunately, cognitive theories of childhood anxiety have developed at a much slower rate. Although childhood anxiety researchers have begun to discuss and document the importance of cognitive factors in understanding and treating childhood anxiety disorders (cf. Kendall & Chansky, 1991; Kendall & Ronan, 1990; Vasey, 1993; Vasey & Daleiden, 1996), the level of complexity apparent in adult models remains lacking in the child domain. This has hindered integration of extant research findings and the development of assessment and treatment methods. How-

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ever, recent theoretical developments provide a promising context for growth. Specifically, Kendall and his colleagues (Kendall & Chansky, 1991; Kendall & Ronan, 1990) described a general cognitive theory of childhood anxiety that has begun to stimulate theoretical work in this area. For example, Vasey (1993) considered implications of children's cognitive and emotional development for this general model. In a similar spirit, the present paper expands Kendall's theory by taking an information-processing perspective on childhood anxiety.

Information-processing models describe a sequence of steps through which information is manipulated and modified as it progresses through the cognitive system (Massaro & Cowan, 1993). Adopting an information-processing perspective on childhood anxiety offers several potential advantages. First, the division of cognitive processing into a logical sequence of steps provides a coherent framework for understanding the diverse effects of cognitive factors in childhood anxiety. Second, consideration of the cognitive operations active during each stage in the sequence facilitates elaboration of the types of deficient or distorted cognitive processes and products characteristic of anxious children. This in turn should enhance efforts to target such cognitive deficits and distortions for clinical intervention. Third, this perspective promotes development and application of new assessment methods. In particular, performance-based measures would provide a much needed supplement to the self-report measures of children's cognitions on which researchers in this area have tended to rely. Such measures are particularly important, given that self-reports regarding cognitive activity are often inaccurate (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and some aspects of cognition are not accessible to self-reports (e.g., automatic and nonconscious processes).

The purpose of the present paper is to elaborate an information-processing perspective on childhood anxiety, to review relevant research, and to explore the clinical implications of this model. We begin by reviewing Kendall's cognitive theory of childhood anxiety and then, in the context of the social information-processing model of Dodge (1991; Crick & Dodge, 1994), we explore the relationship between information-processing and anxiety during each stage of the information-processing sequence. Within the discussion of each stage, we review relevant research, discuss implications for conceptualizing childhood anxiety, and consider new directions for assessing anxiety-related cognition. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the information-processing perspective for the treatment of childhood anxiety.

It is important to note that, although some empirical data relevant to each stage of processing are available, childhood anxiety remains an understudied area. The limited information presently available precludes separate consideration of specific anxiety disorder diagnostic categories. Therefore, our discussion is focused broadly on cognitive processes relevant to childhood anxiety in general. It is likely that each anxiety disorder may differ in its characteristic constellation of information-processing features. However, such issues await further research, which may be fostered by this general information-processing framework.

### **A COGNITIVE THEORY OF CHILDHOOD ANXIETY**

The theory proposed by Kendall and his colleagues (e.g., Kendall & Ronan, 1990) consists of two central elements. The first pertains to schemas, which are organized bodies of information in memory. When activated, a schema facilitates the processing

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