



Developmental trajectories of childhood anxiety: Identifying continuity and change in anxious emotion[☆]

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Abstract

This paper outlines a way for thinking about continuity and change in childhood anxiety symptoms. Considerations for a model of continuity and change in anxious emotion are discussed first. Then, a perspective which may resolve inconsistencies across studies on the stability of childhood anxiety problems overtime is presented. The perspective views dysregulation of the anxiety response system and distress/negative affect as the core primary and necessary features of maladaptive anxious emotion and views the disorder-specific symptoms (generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia, separation anxiety, panic disorder, and simple phobia) as secondary characteristics of maladaptive anxious emotion. The perspective emphasizes ordered complexity in the developmental expression of anxious emotion, and delineates expectations for continuity and change in the features of anxious emotion by describing major normative trajectories across childhood and positing multiple sub-trajectories.

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Developmental trajectories of childhood anxiety: Identifying continuity and change in disorders of anxiety

Anxiety disorders in childhood and adolescence are highly prevalent and can cause intense psychosocial impairment (Silverman & Treffers, 2001). Childhood anxiety disorders, if left untreated, predict increased risk for mental disorders and substance use problems later in life (Kendall, Safford, Flannery-Schroeder, & Webb, 2004; Pine, Cohen, Gurley, Brook, & Ma, 1998) and are associated with negative cognitive, neuro-developmental, and hormonal outcomes (Carrión, Weems, & Reiss, 2007; De Bellis et al., 1999). The field has advanced considerably with demonstrated efficacy of cognitive-behavioral and pharmacological strategies in the treatment of childhood anxiety and phobic disorders (see Albano & Kendall, 2002; Creswell & Cartwright-Hatton, 2007; In-Albon & Schneider, 2007; Kendall, 1994; Silverman et al., 1999; Walkup, Labellarte, & Ginsburg, 2002). There have also been advances in knowledge about the processes and mechanisms responsible for childhood anxiety problems as well as the processes that ameliorate these problems (i.e., the how and why). However, the field continues to lack a truly comprehensive theory of the developmental psychopathology of childhood anxiety. An important step in building such a theory would be a description of continuity and change in anxious emotion followed by multidisciplinary research elucidating the factors responsible for continuity and change. The purpose of this paper is to provide an empirically supported concise model that describes continuity and change in anxious emotion across childhood (i.e., school-aged years).¹

The field of child and adolescent anxiety problems in recent years has consistently moved toward understanding anxiety problems by focusing on the specific anxiety disorders (e.g., separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, etc.) as delineated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994)*. Although the system has produced important advances in knowledge, researchers continue to question the validity of the anxiety disorder diagnoses for the childhood years (see Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2004; Curry, March, & Hervey, 2004; Dadds, James, Barrett, & Verhulst, 2004; Saavedra & Silverman, 2001; Weems & Stickle, 2005). For instance, research suggests that the DSM-defined disorders have incredibly high rates of comorbidity, that the only variables that distinguish them are definitional (e.g., more intense worry in generalized anxiety disorders, more social concerns in social anxiety disorder—making discrimination largely tautological), and that with the possible exception of obsessive compulsive

¹ The goal of the paper is not to summarize the literature on the developmental psychopathology of anxiety and so specific risk and protective factors are discussed mainly in general terms. The goal of the paper is simply to present a developmentally sound perspective for thinking about continuity and change in anxious emotion that fits the existing descriptive literature and fosters sound future research on the developmental origins of problematic anxiety. I use the term “model” to emphasize that this is a hypothetical description of anxious emotion not a theoretical explanation. The use of the term trajectory in the title also reflects the more narrow focus. Specifically, instead of implying that I am delineating “pathways” (which involve specific risk and protective factors to developing a disorder or in disorder maintenance), I focus on the term “trajectory” to imply a more limited aim of describing anxious emotion over time. This goal is consistent with the recent recommendations of Kagan (2007) who has pointed out the importance of adequately describing phenomena of interest before trying to explain them.

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