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## Attentional control and psychopathological symptoms in children

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### Abstract

Attentional control is a regulative trait referring to individual differences in the ability to focus, sustain, and shift attention at will. This article presents two studies examining the relationship between attentional control and psychopathological symptoms in non-clinical children. In Study 1 ( $N = 82$ ), attentional control was measured by means of self-report and a neuropsychological test battery, and then related to scores of psychopathological symptoms. Results indicated that measures of self-reported and performance-based attentional control were moderately correlated. Furthermore, only self-reported attentional control was convincingly associated with symptom scores. Study 2 ( $N = 50$ ) investigated whether the relation between attentional control and psychopathological symptoms was mediated by emotional self-efficacy. Regression analyses provided support for the hypothesized mediation model but only in the case of emotional symptoms. The implications of these findings for the assessment of attentional control and theoretical models on the etiology of child psychopathology are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Attentional control; Psychopathological symptoms; Self-efficacy; Children

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## 1. Introduction

Epidemiological studies have demonstrated that a substantial proportion of children and adolescents suffer from psychiatric disorders, including internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression as well as externalizing problems such as hyperactivity and other disruptive behavior (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Ford, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2003). Clinical psychology research has converged on the notion that most internalizing and externalizing problems in youths originate from the dynamic interplay of multiple factors, and studies have primarily focused on risk and vulnerability variables such as reactive temperament, negative learning experiences, stressful life events, and adverse family background, which all increase youths' proneness to develop psychiatric problems (Essau & Petermann, 1999; Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 2002; Vasey & Dadds, 2001). Recently, there is also increasing research interest in protective influences, which may shield children and adolescents against the development of psychopathological problems.

The temperamental characteristic of effortful control is such a protective variable that is currently receiving an increasing amount of research attention. Briefly, effortful control can be defined as "the ability to inhibit a dominant response to perform a subdominant response" (Rothbart & Bates, 2006) and refers to self-regulative processes that enable a person to control and regulate behavior under certain circumstances. An important aspect of effortful control is attentional control, which pertains to the ability to organize incoming stimuli in order to maintain a calm state of mind, delay gratification, tolerate change, and create an appropriate cognitive and behavioral response to selected stimuli exclusively (Rothbart, Ellis, & Posner, 2004). It has been proposed that children and adolescents who habitually display low levels of attentional control are poor at regulating emotions and behavior, and hence run greater risk for developing various types of internalizing and externalizing problems (Muris & Ollendick, 2005; Nigg, 2006). Empirical evidence for this notion mainly comes from questionnaire studies in which children and adolescents completed self-reports of attentional control (e.g., the Attentional Control Scale for Children or ACS-C; Derryberry & Reed, 2002) and psychopathological symptoms (Meesters, Muris, & Van Rooijen, 2007; Muris, De Jong, & Engelen, 2004; Muris, Meesters, & Rompelberg, 2007). This research has consistently shown that lower levels of attentional control are associated with higher levels of psychopathological problems in youths, including symptoms of anxiety, aggression, depression, and ADHD.

This article presents two simultaneously run studies that further examined the relationship between attentional control and psychopathological symptoms in children. In Study 1, it was examined whether the negative association between attentional control and psychopathological symptoms could also be documented when using a neuropsychological test battery for measuring attentional control capacity. Admittedly, in a recent pilot study, Muris, Van der Pennen, Sigmond, and Mayer (submitted for publication) found that correlations between a performance-based measure of attentional control and symptoms scores were rather small. However, the researchers noted that this was possibly due to the fact that the behavioral test for measuring attentional control was rather limited and that a more extended battery might be necessary to really measure children's capacity for controlling attentional processes. For this reason, children in the current study were tested more extensively with the complete Test of Everyday Attention in Children (TEA-Ch; Manly et al., 2001), which includes a total of nine subtests that call upon focusing, sustaining, and switching attention.

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