

Relations among perceived parental rearing behaviors, attachment style, and worry in anxious children

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Abstract

The present study extended the findings of Muris et al. [Muris, P., Meesters, C., Merckelbach, H., & Hulskenbeck, P. (2000). Worry in children is related to perceived parental rearing and attachment. *Behavior Research and Therapy*, 38, 487–497] regarding the relations between perceived parental rearing behaviors, self-reported attachment style, and worry in a community sample to a clinical sample of anxious children. Sixty-four children and adolescents, aged 7–18 years, with a primary anxiety disorder completed (a) the EMBU-C, a questionnaire measuring perceptions of parental rearing behaviors, (b) a single-item measure of attachment style, and (c) an index of worry severity. Findings revealed that child rated parental rearing behaviors, particularly parental rejection, were positively related to child worry. Self-reported attachment style was also related to worry, such that children who classified themselves as ambivalently attached reported higher levels of worry than did children who classified themselves as securely attached. Parenting style and attachment were found to make independent contributions to worry. The results are compared to those from Muris et al.'s community study, and implications for future research are discussed.

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Current conceptualizations view anxiety disorders as a combination of biological (Hettema, Prescott, Myers, Neale, & Kendler, 2005; Stoppel, Albrecht, Pape, & Stork, 2006; Weissman, 1993) and psychosocial factors (Albano, Chorpita, & Barlow, 2003; see Rapee, 1997 for a review; Whaley, Pinto, & Sigman, 1999). Over the past few decades, researchers have increasingly focused on the role that parents play in the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents (e.g., Cobham, Dadds, & Spence, 1999; Sigueland, Kendall, & Steinberg, 1996). Parental

characteristics, such as temperament, anxiety symptoms, modeling of anxious behavior, and parental rearing behaviors, are thought to contribute to childhood anxiety problems. To evaluate this model, studies have utilized a variety of assessment strategies and identified several parental rearing behaviors associated with childhood anxiety. The present study aimed to investigate the use of a self-report questionnaire measuring children's perceptions of parental rearing behaviors, the EMBU (Swedish acronym for "My memories of upbringing") for children (EMBU-C; Castro, Toro, Van der Ende, & Arrindell, 1993; Gruner, Muris, & Merckelbach, 1999), with clinically anxious children. Although the EMBU-C has been successfully used to explore associations among children's worry and perceptions of parental rearing behaviors in

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community studies, it has not yet been adequately evaluated in a clinical population of anxious children.

1. Parental rearing behaviors

In a review of the literature on the relation between parenting and childhood anxiety, Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, and Chu (2003) concluded that childhood anxiety is most consistently associated with three parenting dimensions: parental control (i.e., overprotectiveness), acceptance, and modeling of anxious/avoidant behavior. Indeed, empirical research has found that parents of anxious children are more overprotective (Messer & Beidel, 1994; Silverman, Cerny, & Nelles, 1988), less accepting (Scott, Scott, & McCabe, 1991; Moore, Whaley, & Sigman, 2004), and less granting of psychological autonomy (Barrett, Shortt, & Healy, 2002; Siqueland et al., 1996) than parents of non-anxious children. In particular, through direct observation of parent–child interactions, Siqueland et al. found that parents of anxious children were less tolerant of differences of opinion, demonstrated less respect for the child's views, and exhibited more judgmental or dismissive reactions, than parents of non-anxious children. In the study by Moore et al., mothers of anxious children, regardless of their own level of anxiety, were less warm compared to mothers of non-anxious children. The authors concluded that maternal criticism and rejection play a significant role in the development of childhood anxiety. Other studies, such as those by Barrett and colleagues (see Dadds & Barrett, 1996 for a review), found that parents of anxious children model anxious behaviors and maladaptive problem solving strategies that lead to behavioral avoidance in children (Barrett, Rapee, Dadds, & Ryan, 1996; Chorpita, Albano, & Barlow, 1996).

To date, most research examining anxious individuals' perceptions of their parents' rearing behaviors has been retrospective. While most studies have demonstrated differences in perceived parental rearing behaviors between individuals with and without anxiety disorders, specific findings have often been contradictory (Alonso et al., 2004; Turgeon, O'Connor, Marchand, & Freeston, 2002). For example, Alonso et al. recently employed the EMBU to assess recall of parental rearing behaviors among OCD adult outpatients and healthy controls. Patients with OCD reported higher levels of rejection from their fathers during their childhood as compared to healthy controls. In addition, low levels of parental emotional warmth partially predicted the presence of hoarding symptoms among OCD patients. The authors did not find a

difference regarding perceived parental overprotection between the groups. This was surprising given the numerous studies describing high levels of parental overprotection in OCD patients (Merkel, Pollard, Wiener, & Staebler, 1993; Turgeon et al., 2002). One such study completed by Turgeon et al. compared outpatients with panic disorder with agoraphobia (PDA), outpatients with OCD, and non-anxious controls. Findings were similar among patients with OCD and PDA, such that they were more likely to rate their parents (both mothers and fathers) as more overprotective compared to healthy controls. In contrast, no differences emerged between the anxious and non-anxious groups regarding perceived rejection or emotional warmth. Thus, results have been contradictory and often criticized for the retrospective nature of the data. Indeed, recollections of parental practices experienced during childhood are limited not only due to anxious symptoms but also the duration of time since childhood that may bias their recall.

While structured parent–child interaction tasks and retrospective studies can provide useful information, clinicians working with anxious children would benefit from the ease and clinical utility of child self-report questionnaires that assess children's perceptions of parental rearing behaviors. Such information would have significant implications for the treatment of childhood anxiety at the family level. To date, few self-report measures have been developed (e.g., EMBU-C; Castro et al., 1993; Gruner et al., 1999; e.g., CRPBI-30; Schludermann & Schludermann, 1970), and empirical data to support their use with clinically anxious children are sparse (Bogels, van Oosten, Muris, & Smulders, 2001).

In an effort to offer a child report measure of parental rearing behaviors, the adult version of the EMBU (Perris, Jacobsson, Lindstrom, von Knorring, & Perris, 1980), a retrospective measure pertaining to the childhoods of adults, was modified for use with children. The EMBU-C (Castro et al., 1993; Gruner et al., 1999) is a child-report questionnaire assessing four parental rearing behaviors: emotional warmth, overprotection/control, anxious rearing, and rejection. Community studies by Muris et al. using the EMBU-C have generally demonstrated significant and positive associations between perceived parental anxious rearing, rejection, and control, on the one hand, and children's anxiety symptoms, on the other hand (Gruner et al., 1999; Muris & Merchelbach, 1998).

Conversely, studies with clinical samples of children have not found significant differences. For instance, no associations were found between parental rearing

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