



# Do controlling maternal behaviours increase state anxiety in children's responses to a social threat? A pilot study

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## Abstract

Past research has demonstrated a link between controlling parenting and child anxiety. However, the causal nature of this association has not yet been established since most previous studies have utilised cross-sectional designs. The aim of the current study was to implement an experimental design to examine the impact of maternal control on children's state anxiety when faced with a social threat. Mothers of 26 children aged 7–13 years were randomly allocated to conditions in which they were either required to be overly controlling or minimally controlling during preparation of a practice speech by their child. In a subsequent speech that children were required to prepare alone, children whose mothers had previously been overly controlling during the practice showed greater anxiety than did children whose mothers had previously been minimally controlling. This pilot study describes a novel paradigm that has the potential to address issues related to the causal role of specific parenting behaviours in the experience of negative emotions.

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While categorisation of parent behaviours has been complex and inconsistent, the parenting literature has generally referred to two overarching meta-constructs of parenting style. One

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overall style is characterised by controlling, intrusive and protective behaviours while the other is characterised by lack of warmth, harshness and criticism (Rapee, 1997). Several theoretical models have emphasised the role of the first of these overarching factors in the development of childhood anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Hudson & Rapee, 2004; Manassis & Bradley, 1994; Rapee, 2001; Rubin & Mills, 1991). Although the terms have often been used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably, there is reason to believe that anxiety may be more directly associated with more specific lower order constructs of parent behaviour. In a recent meta-analysis of parent–child interactions and anxiety, different subtypes of parent behaviour explained different amounts of variance in anxious symptoms ranging from 1 to 18% (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). It is likely that parenting behaviours differ not so much in the actual behaviours that are employed, but in the situations through which they are triggered. As an example, a controlling behaviour where a parent takes over an action from their child, might be defined as “intrusive” in the context of a pleasurable activity or “overprotective” in the context of a potentially dangerous activity. Recently it has been suggested that it may be overprotective parent behaviour; in other words, behaviour that excessively protects the child from any indicators of threat, which is more specifically related to child anxiety (Edwards & Rapee, 2007). Due to the variety of terms and constructs that have been considered, the current paper will use the broader term, *parental control*, when discussing the parenting literature (except where specific studies are being described).

A considerable amount of research using both clinical and non-clinical populations has investigated parent–child interactions in the development of anxiety (for reviews see McLeod et al., 2007; Rapee, 1997; Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003). The majority of this research has relied on questionnaire measures although an increasing number of direct observational studies has been utilised in recent years. While results have not been entirely consistent, the majority of the evidence appears to support an association between a controlling (and to a lesser extent a harsh or critical) style of parenting and anxiety in offspring.

Research to date has been principally correlational and hence has not addressed issues pertaining to direction of effect. Although it is possible that overly controlling parenting causes a child to be anxious, it is equally plausible that a child with a vulnerable temperament elicits particular parenting qualities that are overinvolved and controlling (Hudson & Rapee, 2004; Wood et al., 2003). Alternately, a third factor such as temperament shared between parent and child may be responsible for the association (Kendler, 1996). Wood et al. (2003) argue that in order to clarify the potential pathways linking parenting with child anxiety, research must move beyond simple correlational designs to longitudinal research or short-term experimental designs. A few studies to date have attempted to examine the direction of effects, all of which have implemented longitudinal designs.

Rubin, Nelson, Hastings, and Asendorpf (1999) implemented a longitudinal design to investigate the relation between children’s social inhibition and parents’ beliefs about optimal parenting. Based primarily on questionnaire data, Rubin et al. (1999) found mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of child shyness at age 2 to be stable through age 4 and to predict a lack of encouragement of independence at age 4. Findings for the reverse, however, were not supported. That is, although parent-reported lack of encouragement of independence was stable from ages 2 to 4, it did not predict child shyness at age 4. The authors’ conclusion from this research was that children’s dispositional qualities predict subsequent parental behaviours for both mothers and fathers (Rubin et al., 1999).

A contrasting result was obtained in a more recent study by Rubin, Burgess, and Hastings (2002), in which parenting styles were found to have a more significant impact on children’s

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