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“Danger is lurking everywhere”. The relation between anxiety and threat perception abnormalities in normal children[☆]

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Abstract

The present study examined the relation between anxiety and depression and threat perception abnormalities. Children were exposed to stories describing social situations. Some of the stories were ambiguous (i.e., these stories contained information that could be interpreted as threatening) whereas other stories were non-threatening (i.e., these stories contained no obvious trace of threat). From children's responses to the stories, several threat perception indices were derived. Children's level of anxiety and depression were assessed by means of self-report questionnaires. Results indicated that high levels of anxiety were accompanied by a high frequency of threat perception, high ratings of threat, a high frequency of threatening interpretations, high levels of negative feelings and cognitions, and an early detection of threat. Interestingly, significant associations between anxiety and threat perception abnormalities were not only observed in response to ambiguous stories but also in relation to non-threatening scenarios. Furthermore, depression was also connected with threat perception distortions. Even when controlling for anxiety levels, depression remained significantly related to threat frequency, threat ratings, and threat thresholds. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

According to Kendall's (1985) theory of childhood anxiety, pathological fear and anxiety result from the chronic overactivity of schemas around themes of danger and death. These overactive schemas are assumed to chronically focus processing resources on threat-relevant information. Cognitive distortions play a prominent role in Kendall's theory. These distortions pertain to cognitive processes that are biased or erroneous, and therefore yield dysfunctional and maladaptive thoughts and behaviors (see for a comprehensive review, Daleiden & Vasey, 1997).

One example of such a cognitive distortion is interpretation bias, which reflects anxious children's tendency to more readily interpret ambiguous situations as threatening. Support for the existence of interpretation bias in anxious children comes from a study by Barrett, Rapee, Dadds and Ryan (1996). These authors examined interpretations of ambiguous situations in anxiety disordered children, children with oppositional defiant disorder, and normal controls. Children were presented with vignettes of ambiguous situations and asked about what was happening during each situation. Then children were given two possible neutral outcomes and two possible threatening outcomes and asked which outcome was most likely to occur. Results showed that both anxious and oppositional children interpreted ambiguous stories as more threatening than did normal controls. Interestingly, anxious children more frequently chose avoidant outcomes, whereas oppositional children more often selected aggressive outcomes (see for similar findings, Chorpita, Albano & Barlow, 1996; Bögels & Zigterman, 2000). Employing a different approach, Hadwin, Frost, French and Richards (1997) investigated whether children's level of trait anxiety would be related to the interpretation of ambiguous stimuli. Children listened to homophones (i.e., words that sound the same but have two distinct meanings, such as *dye* versus *die*) and were asked to indicate the interpretation of a word by pointing to an appropriate picture. Results showed that levels of trait anxiety significantly predicted children's interpretation of homophones. More precisely, increases in levels of anxiety were positively associated with threatening interpretations. Altogether, these findings suggest that anxious children are more likely to interpret ambiguous information in a threatening way.

In two recent studies, Muris and colleagues (Muris, Merckelbach & Damsma, 2000b; Muris et al., 2000a) found further support for the existence of cognitive distortions in anxious children. More specifically, in both studies, evidence was obtained for the presence of threat perception abnormalities in anxious children. In the first study (Muris et al., 2000b), socially anxious children ($n = 28$) and non-socially anxious children ($n = 224$) were exposed to ambiguous stories in which social situations were described. Children were told that some of these stories were scary, i.e., these stories would have a bad end, whereas other stories were not scary, i.e., these stories would have a happy end. Children were instructed to find out as quickly as possible whether the pertinent story was scary or not scary. Stories were read aloud sentence by sentence, and after each sentence children were asked whether they thought that the story would be scary or not scary. Results indicated that socially anxious children needed to hear fewer sentences before deciding that an ambiguous

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