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The connection between cognitive development and specific fears and worries in normal children and children with below-average intellectual abilities: a preliminary study

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Abstract

The present study explored the relationship between cognitive development and anxiety phenomena in 4–12-year-old children. Fears and worries of normal children ($n=176$) were compared to those of children with below-average intellectual abilities (children with BAIA; $n=105$). We evaluated to what extent level of cognitive development as indexed by a Piagetian conservation task was associated with the presence of fears and worries. While normal children and children with BAIA did not differ with regard to the content of their fears and worries, normal children more frequently reported such anxiety phenomena during the semi-structured Anxiety Interview than did children with BAIA. Furthermore, in normal children, evidence was found to suggest that level of cognitive development contributes to the experience of fears and worries. That is, anxiety phenomena were more prevalent among those children who passed a Piagetian conservation task. However, when anxiety phenomena were assessed by means of the Koala Fear Questionnaire (KFQ), a different picture emerged. KFQ data suggested that fears were less frequent in normal children and those children with BAIA who had a higher level of cognitive functioning. Apparently, the Anxiety Interview and the KFQ tap quite different aspects of anxiety. The KFQ seems to measure primitive fears that are likely to be prevalent among children with limited cognitive capacity, whereas the Anxiety Interview assesses more sophisticated anxiety phenomena that probably depend on high levels of cognitive functioning. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Fear and worry are distinct anxiety phenomena. Whereas fear refers to the unpleasant feeling that arises as a response to realistic danger (Marks, 1987), worry pertains to fearful thought processes (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983). Thus an important difference between these two phenomena is that fear occurs when the subject is actually confronted with a dangerous stimulus or situation, whereas worry takes place in the absence of actual danger and is primarily concerned with thinking about threatening scenarios.

Research has shown that fears are quite common in children (see for a review, Craske, 1997). For example, Ollendick, King, and Frary (1989) found an average of 14 fears reported by American and Australian youths aged 7–17 years and there are good reasons to believe that this number is quite similar across different cultures (e.g., Ollendick, Yang, King, Dong, & Akande, 1996). Most childhood fears are concerned with dangerous situations, physical harm, and/or animals (e.g., Gullone & King, 1992; Muris, Merckelbach, & Collaris, 1997a; Ollendick et al., 1989; Ollendick, Yule, & Ollier, 1991; Shore & Rapport, 1998). However, the content of childhood fears changes as a function of age, a phenomenon that Marks (1987) termed the “ontogenetic parade” of childhood fears. Germane to this issue is the classic study by Bauer (1976) who asked 4–12-year-old children to specify what they feared most. Bauer noted that 74% of the 4–6-year-olds, 53% of the 7–9-year-olds, but only 5% of the 10–12-year-olds reported fears of imaginary creatures such as ghosts and monsters. In contrast, only 11% of the 4–6-year-olds, but 53% of the 7–9-year-olds, and 55% of the 10–12-year-olds reported fears of bodily injury and physical danger. These findings were replicated by Muris, Merckelbach, Gadet, and Moulart (2000a). Their study also demonstrated that fears are fairly common among young children (71%), peak in middle childhood (i.e., after age 7; 87%), and then decline as children become older (68%).

In contrast to specific childhood fears, worry in children has not been well researched. The few studies that have been carried out indicate that worry is also a common phenomenon among children. For example, Orton (1982) found that >70% of a large sample of primary school children reported 10 or more topics about which they worried (see for similar findings, Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, Sermon, & Zwakhalen, 1998a). Children usually worry about harm befalling to themselves or to significant others, school performance, and/or social issues (e.g., Muris et al., 1998a; Silverman, La Greca, & Wasserstein, 1995; Stickler, 1996). Vasey, Crnic, and Carter (1994) examined the developmental pattern of worries in children aged 5–6, 8–9, and 11–12 years. These authors reported that worries about threats to physical well-being predominated among the 5–6-year-olds, but were less frequent among older children. In these older children, worries primarily focused on behavioural competence, social evaluation, and psychological well-being. Furthermore, Vasey et al. (1994) noted that children in the two older age groups displayed a greater variety of worries and were more able to elaborate the negative consequences of these worries compared to the 5–6-year-olds. Highly similar results were obtained in the Muris et al. (2000a) study. That study found that a considerable proportion (47%) of young children reported to worry every now and then, but this anxiety phenomenon became clearly more prominent in children after age 7, with a prevalence rate of almost 80%.

It is plausible to assume that the above described developmental patterns of fears and worries are mediated by children’s cognitive capacities (see Marks, 1987). That is, fears and worries depend on the perception and conceptualization of immediate or anticipated threat. Perception

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