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## Cognition in childhood anxiety: conceptual, methodological, and developmental issues

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### Abstract

Anxiety disorders are one of the most common psychiatric disorders in the general child population and can have significant impact on immediate and long-term functioning. Despite the common use of cognitive-behavioral interventions that target specific, negative thoughts in anxious children, it is unclear that the extant literature clearly documents cognitive aberrations among these children. In this review, conceptual and methodological issues related to the assessment of cognition in anxious children are highlighted and empirical data addressing these areas are evaluated. Furthermore, data addressing cognitive change as a function of treatment outcome is examined, and the impact of cognitive development as a moderating variable is discussed. Finally, areas for future research are presented.

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### 1. Introduction

For the past 30 years, the predominant conceptual model of anxiety disorders has been considered to consist of three components: somatic or physical reactivity, subjective distress, and behavioral avoidance (e.g., Lang, 1968). Over the ensuing years, the term

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subjective distress has become equated with cognition, cognitive schemata, and the presence of anxious thoughts. Increasingly, models of etiology, maintenance, and treatment of anxiety disorders have suggested a need to attend to the cognitive dimension and, in some cases, the “cognitive model” has been proposed as a primary model for anxiety disorders (e.g., Clark & Beck, 1988). As usually occurs, models of disorders, as they exist in adults, are adopted as the initial basis for understanding these same disorders in children and, thus, there has been a marked increase in cognitive-behavioral research aimed at anxiety disorders in youth. Growing amounts of empirical data address the “cognitive factors” associated with childhood anxiety (e.g., Bogels & Zigterman, 2000; Houston, Fox, & Forbes, 1984; Kendall & Chansky, 1991; King, Mietz, Tinney, & Ollendick, 1995; Messer & Beidel, 1994; Prins, 1986; Prins & Hanewald, 1999; Zatz & Chassin, 1983, 1985) and, although a substantial literature on cognition and childhood anxiety disorders exists, much of it is conflictual in nature. Thus, the purpose of this review is to present and evaluate this literature and propose areas for future investigation.

Understanding cognition in childhood anxiety disorders requires attention to conceptual, methodological, and developmental considerations. As such, this review presents some issues that have received inadequate attention thus far. First, with respect to conceptual issues, there are competing definitions of the term “cognition.” For example, within the childhood anxiety literature, the term cognition broadly refers to both actual thoughts reported (e.g., cognitive product; Kendall & Ingram, 1987) and to a basic underlying schema organized around a theme of threat (e.g., cognitive structure; Kendall & Ronan, 1990). For purposes of clarity, we shall refer to the former simply as cognitive content and the latter as cognitive process. In the first part of this review, the literature on both cognitive content and process in anxious children will be examined. To date, most research has focused solely on cognitive content including assessing negative vs. positive cognitions, determining cognitive errors (inaccurate beliefs), evaluating cognitive distortions, and determining state-of-mind ratios (SOM; ratio of positive to negative thoughts). Additionally, we examine whether there is cognitive content specific to childhood anxiety as opposed to a more general cognitive style associated with various affective states. Following the review of cognitive content, research on cognitive process is presented. Specifically, we review the results of investigations that have examined anxious children’s interpretations, attributions, and expectancies in relation to specific events, including research examining the role of familial factors (e.g., transmission of information) in maintaining a specific cognitive style among anxious children. Finally, we consider the role of emotional understanding in children’s report of cognition. Specifically, research suggesting that young children may not understand the links between cognition and emotion is reviewed, and implications for assessment are considered.

This review also addresses available research examining cognitive change in the context of treatment outcome. Based on a marked increase in cognitive-behavioral treatments aimed at childhood anxiety disorders within recent years, there remains a growing need for a better understanding of the changes (if any) associated with specific treatment components. For example, despite the lack of clear evidence that children with anxiety disorders have “distorted” cognitions, many researchers and clinicians have included cognitive interven-

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