

Children, Parents and Anxiety Sensitivity: What Are the Links?



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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety Sensitivity (AS; Reiss & McNally, 1985) refers to the fear of anxiety-related bodily sensations due to the belief that these sensations will lead to catastrophic outcomes such as physical illness, social embarrassment, and mental incapacity.

Given AS's role in the aetiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders and given the high prevalence of anxiety disorders among youth – 10% (Silverman & Treffers, 2001) – it is important to better understand how AS develops in the child.

Stein, Jang, and Livesley (1999) examined the aetiology of AS and suggested that environmental influences, and more specifically, childhood learning experiences, explain the largest proportion of AS variance (55%).

Several authors then investigated the role of childhood learning experiences in the development of AS. Their results suggested that individuals with high levels of AS received (a) more catastrophic information and reinforcement of anxiety and cold-related sensations; and (b) more observation of the catastrophic model.

These studies present some limitations: few studies of children and little attention to the role of gender and the different influence of father and mother.

OBJECTIVES

This work examines the relationships between childhood learning experiences and the development of AS within the family environment, in a non-clinical sample of children.

METHOD

Subjects and procedure:

Seventy-one normal children aged between 9 and 12 years (37 boys and 34 girls) were recruited from regular primary and secondary schools in area of Liège, Belgium.

All subjects were tested individually in a separate room at home. First they were interviewed about their learning experiences with anxiety-related and cold-related somatic symptoms. Three learning experiences were examined – reinforcement, verbal transmission and observational learning (mother and father) – using the Questionnaire des Expériences d'Apprentissage (QEA). AS levels were assessed using the Childhood Anxiety Sensitivity Index (CASI).

Assessment:

- *Childhood Anxiety Sensitivity Index (CASI)* (Silverman et al., 1991)
- *Questionnaire d'Expériences d'Apprentissage (QEA)* (Stassart, 2008)

RESULTS

If we observe the results without the effect of gender role, we find significant correlations between QEA and CASI (r from 0.31 to 0.60, $p < 0.01$), except for the reinforcement of somatic symptoms in learning by observation of the father.

When gender role is considered, our findings are as follows:

Cold symptoms (QEA 1)

Spearman correlations between AS level and learning experiences (reinforcement and transmission of catastrophic information) children receive from their parents when they have cold sensations.

	QEA 1	CASI	
		r	p
Boys	Reinf.	0.593	.000**
	Verb. Trans.	0.610	.000**
Girls	Reinf.	0.301	.084*
	Verb. Trans.	0.573	.000**

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$

	QEA 2	CASI	
		r	p
Boys	Reinf.	0.624	.000**
	Verb. Trans.	0.409	.012**
Girls	Reinf.	0.198	0.263
	Verb. Trans.	0.548	.001**

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$

Anxiety symptoms (QEA 2)

Same but for anxiety-related sensations.

Learning by observation of the father and the mother (QEA 3)

	QEA 3	CASI			
		Boys		Girls	
		r	p	r	p
Mother	Reinf.	0.388	.018**	0.133	.454
	Verb. Trans.	0.329	.047**	0.295	.090*
Father	Reinf.	0.162	.339	0.003	.985
	Verb. Trans.	0.375	.022**	0.219	.214

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$

Spearman correlations between AS level and learning experiences (reinforcement and transmission of catastrophic information) children observe in their mother and father when they have cold and anxiety sensations.

CONCLUSION

These results suggest that children with high levels of AS received more learning experiences and also suggest a gender-related relation: between different learning experiences for boys and girls and between the observation of the mother and the father.

Regarding the children's gender roles, we observed that boys receive more learning experiences than girls. Indeed, Taylor et al. (2008) explain that the aetiology of boys' AS is more influenced by environmental factors than that of girls.

As for differences between mother and father, we observed that learning by observation of the father is linked only to boys' AS. These findings relate to the specific impact of a father's fears in the development of AS in children. A possible explanation results from work on social stereotypes: men learn that it is less acceptable socially for them than for women to express their fears (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). It is expected that men will confront their fears and speak less about them. And thus, a father who dares to express his distress will shock his child more than a mother who does this (Cummings et al., 2002). Moreover, gender transgressions are perceived more negatively for boys child than girls (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989).

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