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Parental sensitivity to child anxiety problems: An examination of child, family, and demographic influences

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting has traditionally been conceptualized and measured as a set of enduring traits. However, parenting can change dramatically in response to changes in child behavior.

Anxiety in childhood has been found to increase risk for several negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, including depression, chronic anxiety, and substance use (e.g., Kendall, Safford, Flannery-Schroeder, & Webb, 2004). Unfortunately, little is known about what factors contribute to a parent's decision to take action in response to their child's problems with anxiety.

Research Question:

- What factors predict the decision to begin a campaign to reduce child anxiety problems?
- Child anxiety and depression problems, unadaptable (inhibited) child temperament, socioeconomic status, family stress, child gender, and ethnicity served as predictor variables.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS:

- Ns = 363-441
- Predominantly middle class, 26% in lowest two Hollingshead (1979) classes.
- 49% male
- 81% European American, 17% African American, and 2% other ethnicities.

MEASURES:

- **Campaigns:** When children were 11, mothers reported on whether they made an explicit effort to reduce their children's problems with anxiety. They also identified actions taken as part of the campaign from a list of possibilities (e.g., spending more time with child, seeking professional help, discussing problem with other parent).
- **Temperamental Unadaptability:** When children were 5, mothers retrospectively reported on their children's temperament in infancy. Unadaptability refers to fearfulness or unease in the presence of novel situations.
- **SES:** Socioeconomic status was computed when children were age 11 on the basis of parental occupation, income, and education, using the procedure described by Hollingshead (1979).
- **Family Stress:** At child age 10, parents endorsed stressful events (e.g., lost a job, death in family, legal trouble, moved) occurring in the past 12 months from a list of possibilities.
- **Anxiety and Depression:** At child age 10, mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) and answered questions regarding their child's anxiety and depression levels.
- **Gender**
- **Ethnicity:** African American or European American

STATISTICAL PROCEDURES:

- Logistic Regression was used to test if unadaptability, stress, SES, race, and gender predicted parent campaigns. The interactions of anxiety with each of these variables were also tested.
- T-Tests were used to determine if there were differences between parents who began a campaign and those who didn't in regards to child anxiety, unadaptability, stress, and SES.
- Bootstrap Mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was used to test anxiety as a mediator of the influence of stress, unadaptability, and SES on parental campaigns.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated predictors of parents' effort to reduce their children's anxiety problems. Mothers reported on their "campaigns" to reduce anxiety problems at age 11, and reported on their children's temperamental unadaptability, family stress, SES, and child anxiety and depression problems. Logistic regression showed that high levels of stress and unadaptability in infancy, as well as low SES were all associated with an increased probability that a mother would start a campaign to reduce her child's anxiety problems. However, once the effect of child anxiety/depression on mother's concern was statistically controlled, none of these variables were significantly associated with mothers' campaign efforts. Moderating effects of the child and family variables on the association between child anxiety/depression levels and mothers' decision to mount a campaign were also examined. Child gender was the only variable found to increase parental sensitivity to child anxiety/depression. The association between child anxiety/depression and mother's concerns/campaigns efforts was stronger for boys than for girls. The results of this study suggest that child and family influences (e.g., stress, SES) on parents' decisions to respond to child anxiety may be explained by differences in child anxiety levels. In addition, the findings indicate that parents are more sensitive to levels of anxiety and depression in their sons than in their daughters.

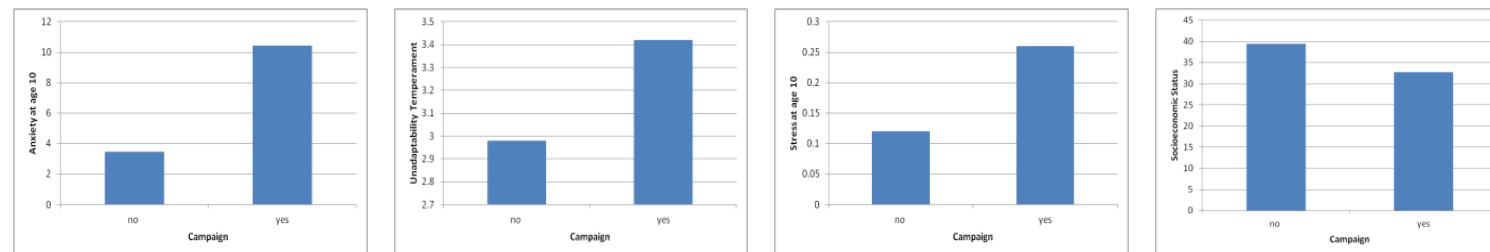
RESULTS

- The first analysis tested predictors of whether or not a campaign was initiated
 - Child anxiety level, unadaptability in infancy, stress, and low SES were all significantly associated with an increased probability of mounting a campaign. These results can be seen in figures 1 through 4. However, once child anxiety/depression on mother's concern was statistically controlled, none of these variables were significantly associated with mothers' campaign efforts.
 - Table 1 displays coefficients from the logistical regression which tested the predictors on parent campaigns. Significant results are in bold.
- The next set of analyses tested the moderating effects of the child and family variables on the association between children anxiety/depression levels and mothers' decision to mount a campaign. Child male gender was found to increase parental sensitivity to child anxiety/depression.
- Mediation analyses found that child depression/anxiety significantly mediated the effects of low SES, stress, and unadaptability on parental campaigns.

Table 1. Coefficients from logistic regression models predicting parent campaigns.

Predictors	B (logits)	SE	Odds Ratio	p
Anxiety	1.11	.24	3.03	.000
Unadaptability	-.213	.344	.81	.535
Anxiety x Unadaptability	.37	.25	1.45	.142
Anxiety	1.01	.28	2.74	.000
Stress	.411	.29	1.51	.152
Anxiety x Stress	.02	.18	1.02	.915
Anxiety	.94	.25	2.56	.000
SES	.02	.36	1.02	.967
Anxiety x SES	-.42	.25	.66	.10
Anxiety	1.07	.23	2.92	.000
Race	-3.52	4.23	.03	.406
Anxiety x Race	4.48	3.63	88.48	.217
Anxiety	2.12	.53	8.34	.000
Gender	2.16	1.04	8.65	.038
Anxiety x Gender	-1.31	.58	.27	.024

Figures 1 through 4. Comparisons between campaign groups.



DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS:

- High levels of stress and unadaptability as well as low SES were all associated with increased probability that a parent would mount a campaign.
- Results suggest that child and family influences, (i.e., stress and SES) on parents' decision to intervene in their children's anxiety may be explained by their effects on child anxiety/depression levels.
- In addition, the findings indicate that parents are more sensitive to levels of anxiety and depression in their sons than in their daughters, suggesting the possibility that parents may underestimate the significance of anxiety in their daughters.

LIMITATIONS:

- Parents (usually mothers) were reported on all variables.
- Analyses do not test which campaign tactics contribute to improved child behavior.
- Results from longitudinal analyses suggest causal effects, but causality cannot be demonstrated with correlational data.