

## Parenting Effects on Childhood Anxiety: A Review

### INTRODUCTION

According to research, childhood and adolescence are extreme risk phases for developing anxiety symptoms and full blown anxiety disorders (Beesdo, Knappe, and Pine 2009). Many factors effect these particular outcomes, including child temperament, genetics, life events, and none can be rightfully neglected when researching anxiety etiology. There is a large literature which focuses on parenting types and parenting effects on development of childhood anxiety and other internalizing psychosocial symptoms.

In an article discussing definitions found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) and anxiety's relation to fear and depression, anxiety is defined as "a future-oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative events" (Craske, Rauch, Ursano, Prenoveau, Pine, and Zinbarg 2009). Symptoms are usually exhibited both internally and externally, including worry, avoidance, muscle tension, sweating, trembling, heart palpitations, and nausea (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Because of these symptoms, any full blown anxiety disorder which develops during childhood or adolescence can result in more difficult social development, deferred independence, and, ultimately, avoidance of the larger, outside world. According to McLeod, Wood, and Weisz anxiety disorders are one of the most common childhood conditions (2007).

Huver, et. al. claimed adolescence was an important moment to research because it is "the period of time that antisocial and health-compromising behaviors develop." They also noted that parents are still the primary socializing agents and this is accomplished hugely through parenting style, among other more subtle cues (2010).

## PARENTING TYPES

### *Acceptance and Control*

In the literature of parenting and its effects on children, classifications of parenting types have generally been separated into four categories. Authoritative parenting represents high control and high acceptance; this means a parent is highly involved and strict in most aspects of a child's life, but displays support and warmth throughout their development. Authoritarian parenting represents high control and low acceptance, or low support and little warmth. (Shucksmith, Hendry, Gelndinning, 1995; Huver, Otten, Vries, and Engels 2010). The other two general classifications have been varied in the literature. Shucksmith, et. al. called the first permissive (low control, high/varied acceptance) and the second neglectful (low control, low acceptance), but claimed neglectful to be a type of permissive parenting (1995). More recently, Huver, et. al. called the types indulgent (low control, high acceptance) and uninvolved (low control, low acceptance) (2010). Consistent throughout the literature, when using these types of classifications, are the two main elements of control and acceptance – sometimes referred to as parental warmth (Wagner, Cohen, Brook, 1996; Muris and Merckelbach, 1998; Wolfradt, Hempel, and Miles, 2003; McLeod, Wood, Weisz, 2007; Wei and Kendall, 2014; Hurrell, Hudson, and Schniering 2015).

Some of the literature employed more negative diction. Rejection was used in place of warmth or acceptance in a few reports (Rapee 1997; McLeod, Wood, and Weisz 2007). Though the same characteristics were being investigated, in the cases of more negative diction, more negative outcomes may have been found – due to a research and/or linguistic bias.

Few researchers deviated from the concepts of control, rejection, and warmth. However, those few offered great insight into parenting styles and the numerous ways they can vary. Brown and

Whiteside investigated childhood anxiety using warmth – like the majority – but also included attachment styles, with insights relating to how the two factors are connected (2008). In another article, attachment was used as the sole identifying factor in parenting (Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, and Hulsenbeck 2000). Secure attachment is represented by children who are comfortable with parents leaving because they trust them to return; these parents are usually more dependable and warm. There are two types of insecure attachments. Anxious-resistant (also called ambivalent) results in distress upon departure of parent and ambivalence or acting out upon return; anxious-avoidant results in complete ignorance and lack of care for departure and/or return. It's interesting to note these two insecure types both include the title “anxious,” though only anxious-resistant significantly displays anxiety related symptoms (Brown and Whiteside 2008).

Huver et. al. (2010) performed a study attempting to empirically observe parenting types and which personality factors effected the four (authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, and uninvolved). The more extraverted parents were, the less likely they were to be classified as authoritarian; more agreeable parents were less likely to be authoritarian or uninvolved. Most importantly, in relation to anxious effects on a child, more emotionally stable parents tended to be classified indulgent and uninvolved, which are the more lax parenting types (low control, high support and low control, low support respectively).

In keeping with much of the other research, most fathers who were involved in the study on personality were classified as uninvolved (Huver, et. al. 2010). In a review, it was noted that fathers were often unavailable for testing, whether from not wanting to participate or not being able to get away from other obligations, which could provide an additional insight into father's anxious effect on children (Rapee 1997). In the personality research, most women were

authoritative. Older parents tended to be indulgent or uninvolved; younger were authoritative and authoritarian. This specific statistic did not clarify whether they were older because they had waited to have their first child and/or they had many children. However, there were no significant differences between parenting styles in regard to marital status, education, income, religiousness, or ethnicity (Huver et. al. 2010).

### *Other Parenting Behaviors*

Three of the reviewed articles considered the anxiety diagnoses of parents (Hudson and Rapee, 2001; Gar and Hudson, 2008; Sluis, Steensel, and Bogels 2015). This suggests a consideration of the heredity of internalizing disorders, though the studies themselves focused mainly on modeling behavior: children learning anxiety through observation and interaction with anxious parents. Hudson and Rapee (2001) cited Hersen, Kazdin, Francis, and Grubb (1987), who found that 83% of mothers of children with an anxiety disorder had a lifetime history of anxiety disorder. However, the mothers of anxious children in their study reported the same levels of anxiety and depression as mothers of oppositional and nonclinical children, though they were investigating a smaller group.

One study reviewed a group of literature and tied the studies together empirically to assert a life course approach to childhood anxiety and parenting style (Wu 2007). Wu claimed a child's anxiety and their parent's approach was entirely cyclical and dependent on the other. A change in one side could cause a change in the other in a continuous manner and this is the basic relational dynamic between adolescents and their mothers: parents act a certain way resulting in child depression resulting in parental change, and so on. Hudson and Rapee briefly mentioned this

reciprocal relationship between parent and child actions and reactions (2001), but few others fully considered this cause and effect.

Only one study focused solely on father's parenting and how it effects anxiety in children (Bogels and Phares 2008). Nearly all of the literature in this subject focuses on parents as a unit or maternal parenting only. In many of the parental unit studies, fathers were unavailable during testing, possibly displaying a low dependability or simply a busy work schedule. Two other studies attempted to separate maternal and paternal styles, but found few statistically significant outcomes; they focused mainly on fathers' tendencies to be more active and more harsh with their children (Wagner, et. al. 1996; Sluis, Steensel, and Bogels 2015). Wagner, et. al. found fathers were, overall, used less as a resource (emotional or otherwise) during stressful events (1996).

One interesting study in the literature first identified language tendencies of perfectionist mothers; then the researchers calculated the number of times the words were used in interactions with their children (Affrunti, Geronimi, and Woodruff-Borden 2015). This particular study controlled for maternal anxiety which could have been ignoring the fact that mothers could have been modeling perfectionist and anxious behavior to their child. Perfectionist characteristics are often present in an anxious mind. However, the researchers noted, "Findings from the present study suggest that perfectionistic mothers may have a characteristic linguistic style, beyond that which is linked to anxiety" and, further, this may be one factor in development of child anxiety (Affrunti, et. al. 2015).

## EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

### *Acceptance and Control*

Of the literature which specifically found results linked to the four classifications of parenting types, there was a general agreement that authoritative and permissive are more positive types; authoritarian and uninvolved are negative. Wolfradt, et. al. found authoritarian parents showed the highest levels of both anxiety and depersonalization (a symptom of anxiety disorder) in their children. The permissive group showed the lowest levels, while authoritative and uninvolved classifications were similarly placed in the middle ground (2003). In line with this study, another claimed children with authoritative parents showed better psychosocial development, greater academic competence, less delinquency and fewer somatic symptoms, signifying an overall better effect on life course (Huver et. al. 2010). It is important to note that these child character factors are all related and their outcomes are tied together; less anxiety leads to a child being more able to focus and succeed in school and participate in social groups, and vice versa.

Wu mostly used the terms “acceptance” and “control” which are closely tied to the four classified terms. Her study found when children perceive higher acceptance from parents, they showed fewer symptoms of anxiety (2007). The types related to high acceptance are the two positives: authoritative and permissive. When children perceived more control from parents, they showed more anxiety and more depression as well as externalizing behavioral problems (Wu 2007). This, in regards to the life course connection of these childhood factors, makes sense. Many other articles agreed that acceptance was a main predictor of positive childhood effects, in terms of anxiety (Shucksmith, et. al. 1995; Wolfradt, et. al. 2003). Though control led to variable outcomes depending on level of acceptance, Shucksmith, et. al. wrote, “Parenting which combines high acceptance with “appropriate” levels of control may be the most effective

environment for early to middle adolescence, which is a proper description of the authoritative parenting type.

Wagner, et. al. separated paternal effects and maternal effects in an interesting parenting finding, as seen in the figures below. With low father warmth, the slopes stayed pretty consistent both for high and low mother warmth; for high father warmth, the slopes were greatly changed for depressive symptoms, showing that combination high mother and high father warmth is most beneficial in handling depressive stressful events; same was true for father's harshness (1996). In short, if father warmth or harshness was low, variance in the mother's warmth and harshness effected the children very little. If father's warmth or harshness was high, the mother's variances effected the child radically in comparison.

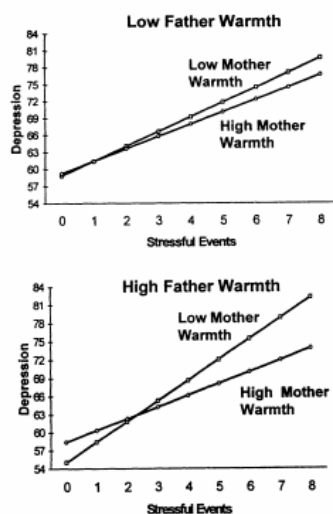


Figure 1. Stress  $\times$  Mother Warmth  $\times$  Father Warmth predicting adolescents' reports of depressive symptoms.

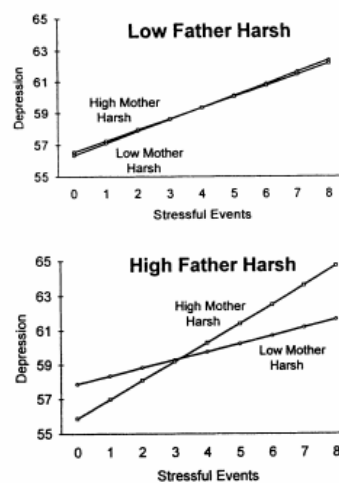
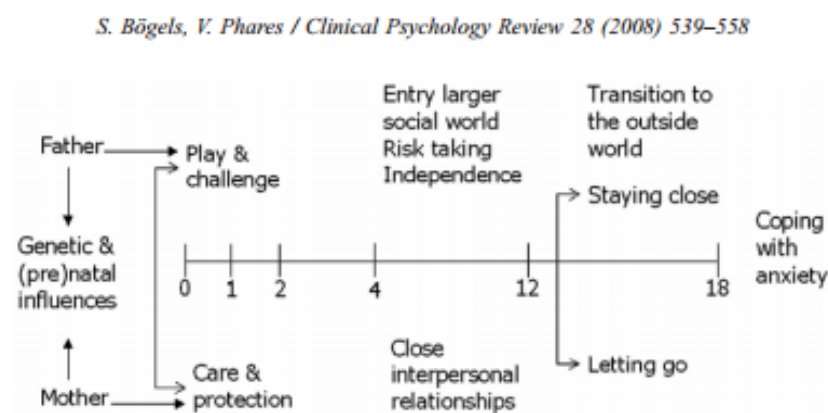


Figure 3. Stress  $\times$  Mother Harsh Discipline  $\times$  Father Harsh Discipline predicting mothers' reports of depressive symptoms.

This suggests that children's psychological outcomes are quite dependent on their father's attitudes toward them. This also supports an idea that both parents, acting cooperatively, find the

best outcomes for their children. In their focused study of paternal effects, Bogels and Phares found fathers who support mothers enhance the quality of the mother–child relationship, and if fathers are unsupportive, the child–mother relationship is of lower quality (2008).

The figure below from Bogels and Phares (2008) shows the different roles of mother and father in relation to the age of the child.



If the father is unable, unavailable, or unwilling to perform one of the tasks (i.e. play & challenge), the child will be more prone to anxiety because they are resultantly more passive and less exploratory (Bogels and Phares 2008). Practice in exploration and risk taking result in more positive, less anxious symptoms, like agoraphobia and worry. This idea connects with Wu, who found in her maternal focus study that the higher perceived maternal control, the higher the child's social anxiety (2007). An extremely controlling mother leaves less room for father's exploration and challenge. Paternal play promotes an active, autonomous, and curious attitude in children, has a beneficial effect on children's cognitive and social development, and seems to defend against anxiety. These findings are irrespective of high or low maternal involvement – which agrees with Wagner, et. al. – irrespective of divorce, and appear to be irrespective of child gender (Bogels and Phares 2008).

In agreement with these ideas on control, especially maternal, Sluis et. al. (2015) claimed parents who strictly control children's actions and emotions deprive them of the opportunities to feel independent and guard them from gaining feelings of mastery and control of themselves, thereby increasing anxious symptoms. Furthermore, rejection (as the negative of acceptance) increases childhood anxiety by reducing self-esteem and their confidence in a safe world and positive outcomes. During socialization, if a child autonomously makes an emotional decision and is then punished, he or she learns to not make those decisions and/or to not be confident in those decisions, which logically leads to anxiety. Parents of anxious children reinforce dependency on themselves.

However, in a finding which disagreed with the existence of the above phenomenon, Hurrell et. al. (2015) found, in their observational study which covered a smaller population, that the mothers of anxious children were as likely as mothers of non-anxious children to encourage their children to express their emotions. Furthermore, mothers in the clinical group of normal children were as likely as anxious mothers to offer support in times of emotional distress. This is in opposition to the above findings that anxiety in children is caused by unsupportive parenting. However, in the study from Hurrell, et. al. the anxious children involved were already diagnosed with some type of anxiety disorder, unlike some of the other studies. In this case, a mother of an anxious children may have changed her responses to the child's emotional actions as a means of therapy. For still, despite their heightened support, the mothers of the group of anxious children were less likely to discuss negative emotions with their children (as a way to understand them) or to engage in activities meant to distract them away from their distress. This is in agreement with much of the other literature which found that parents of anxious children tend to be more overprotective, more involved and intrusive, and more critical; furthermore, they've agreed that

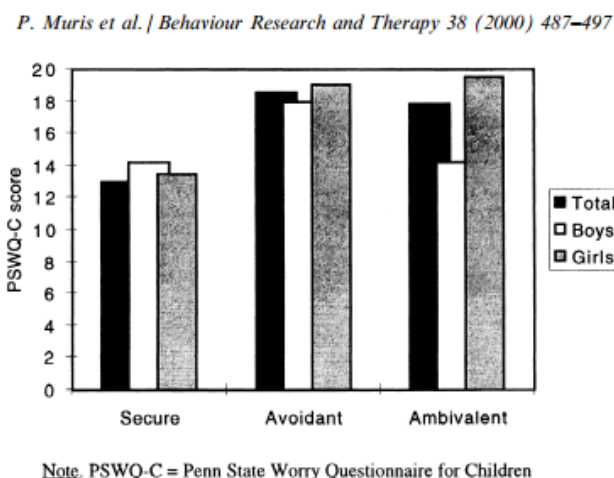
mothers of anxious children communicate more negatively (Hudson and Rapee, 2001; Gar and Hudson 2008). Gar and Hudson found these conclusions regardless of whether or not the mother was anxious herself (2008). Hurrell et. al. (2015) cited a 2009 study from Hudson, Doyle, and Gar which found mothers of anxious children interacted in less negative ways with non-anxious children who were not their own.

In the linguistic study which identified the language of perfectionist mothers, Affrunti et. al. (2015) found perfectionist mothers used adverbs, second person pronouns (i.e. you), negative emotion words, and anger words more often than non-perfectionist mothers. They said, “Hypothetically, the use of negative words by perfectionistic mothers may increase fear and anxiety in the child that over repeated experiences creates a fearful belief system in the child.”. These negative words tie into the actions of rejection and critique from controlling parents which has been shown to lead to anxiety. The study found that second person pronouns and negative emotion words mediated the relationship between maternal perfectionism and childhood anxiety. (Affrunti et. al. 2015). This means that perfectionist mothers caused anxiety in their children through the use of second person pronouns and negative emotion words. Anger words were linked to childhood depression more so than to childhood anxiety (Affrunti, et. al. 2015).

### *Attachment*

The second main factor which has been investigated in regards to parenting style and childhood anxiety is the types of child attachment. As mentioned above, there are three types: secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent. Ambivalent attachment has shown significantly more negative anxious outcomes in children (Brown and Whiteside 2008). However, in a smaller study conducted by Muris, et. al. (2000) there was only a statistically

significant difference between ambivalent and avoidant attachment for boys, though both were significantly higher than secure attachment and were more prone to anxiety. The graph is shown below.



Children who are ambivalently attached to their parents react to their parents' departure in more anxious, worried ways due in part to their parents rejecting attitude. This emotional reaction, when felt chronically, could lead to permanent psychological effects: a lack of confidence in anyone's dependability and a feeling of isolation and resultant fear.

Brown and Whiteside (2008) found ambivalent attachment was a stronger predictor for anxiety disorders than both maternal anxiety and infant temperament, which suggests the attachment style influences the development of an anxiety disorder more so than the other individual factors.

Bogels and Phares (2008) discussed attachment in their article concerning paternal parenting. In agreement with the above graphs of Wagner et. al. on maternal and paternal warmth and harshness, they found secure infant-father attachment was related to independent behavior, as opposed to avoidance of new social situations. Infant-mother attachment was not significantly related in the least.

### *Perceived Parenting*

Throughout much of the literature both on childhood anxiety and on parenting types, research relied on questionnaire data and the child's perceived emotions and perceived parenting. In observational studies, parenting styles are observed directly by researchers, however this review covers only two observational studies.

Perceived parenting is an important indicator, especially in terms of internalizing psychosocial conditions such as anxiety. Because anxiety occurs as a product of thoughts and worries inside a child's mind, it makes sense that the ways in which they perceived their parents' parenting style would have a larger effect than an actual parenting style (if there were any discrepancies).

Wagner et. al. (1996) conducted the study through questionnaire. They found the mothers' reports of depression and anxious symptoms were much lower than the adolescents' self-reports. The self-reports differed hugely across the children's genders, but the reports from the mothers did not vary regardless of son or daughter. The same study found that boys perceived themselves to be more harshly judged and punished by both mother and father than girls did. Possibly as a result, boys had higher conduct problems while girls had higher depression symptoms.

One important observation from Shucksmith et. al. (1995) was the overall relationships between parents and their children (positive or negative). Across permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian parenting groups – regardless of how harsh a child perceived their parent to be – all children believed their relationships with their parents to be positive. The only group which varied between positive and negative was the fourth group Shucksmith et. al. called “Problem parent-adolescent relationships;” they claimed these were potentially neglectful parenting styles,

but did not make a definitive statement. Children in these problem relationships reported they were unsupported and criticized with unreasonable expectations.

## CONCLUSION

There is obviously some effect of parenting on development of childhood anxiety, especially in terms of socialization and learned behaviors. Children learn how to function in the world from interactions throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence and in major part from their parents, so what they've learned should have some effect on their mentality. However, none of the reviewed literature has been able to explain causation. The same question that was raised in the study of already diagnosed anxious children (Hurrell et. al. 2015) must be raised when reviewing all of the studies: which comes first, the parenting style or the anxiety? Wu t(2007) ried to reconcile this causation using life course theory. Essentially she claimed a change in parenting causes a change in child anxiety which causes a change in parenting, and so on. She wrote, "People are changed by changing families, and families are changed by changing the behavior and developmental course of family members."

The life course approach makes sense if anxiety is completely cyclical. However, an adult's personality and how that effects parenting behaviors are formed before a child is even born. While a child can influence these as parenting is learned and developed, something comes first, and babies aren't born with anxiety disorders. To completely understand parenting's relation to children's psychosocial outcomes, causation should be more closely studied in the future.

Muris, et. al. (2000) reported, that while it is tempting to interpret parental rearing styles as antecedents and anxiety levels as consequences, "it cannot be ruled out that higher levels of worry underlie less favorable reports of parental rearing." In this, the researchers speak to the

indefinite causality as well as the reliability of anxious children self-reporting. Anxious children may perceive their parenting styles as more negative because of their anxiety; however, anxiety disorders often cause internal worry in relation to oneself, not about negatives in others.

In a meta-analysis study of the literature, McLeod et. al. (2007) found very small causation between parenting and anxiety; parenting only accounted for a 4% variance in childhood anxiety disorder. Using observational methods, this increased to only 8% variance. Furthermore, parental warmth (included in acceptance) explained only 1% of the variance. The researchers did find that parental control had a medium effect on anxiety, compared to rejection which had just a small effect. From this meta-analysis, it can be concluded that either we need more research on the subject of parenting and its effects on childhood anxiety or there are much larger factors than parenting at play in the lives of anxious children.

On this subject, heredity cannot be ignored. Three of the seventeen articles reviewed directly considered parents' (mostly mothers') own anxiety disorder diagnoses (Hudson and Rapee 2001; Gar and Hudson 2008; Sluis, Steensel, and Bogels 2015). Some of the others actually controlled for this factor, focusing only on personality and parenting style. It is common knowledge that psychological – especially internalizing – disorders run in families; this very fact is used in criminal cases and diagnoses. Sociologically, it may make more sense to investigate life course and parenting style (leaving heredity to the psychologists), but the factor shouldn't be ignored in research as an influence. In any case, anxiety can be learned from anxious parents through modeling of anxious behaviors.

The study of anxiety disorders and where they come from is important. In community samples estimates for the presence of anxiety disorders range between 5 and 20% with half of the estimates lying above 10 (Muris and Merckelbach 1998). Understanding sources and causes of

anxiety will not only help treat, but also prevent through counseling and family coaching.

Already through this current literature, it can be understood that fathers should be more involved in counseling and therapy of anxious children. One 1991 survey of clinicians found that fathers were included in only 6% of the treatment for developmental psychopathology whereas mothers were included in 38% of the treatment (cited by Bogels and Phares 2008). A study which examined parental involvement in treatment of youth anxiety disorders found that exposure to stressors was one of the most helpful treatments (Taboas, McKay, Whiteside, and Storch 2015). If parenting, in both extreme and subtle cases, is a stressor in anxious children, it makes sense for both available parents to be involved in counseling and to understand the effects they have on their children.

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