

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Mother-Child Emotion Communication and Childhood Anxiety Symptom

Brumariu, L. E., & Kerns, K. A. (2015). Mother-child emotion communication and childhood anxiety symptom. *Cognition and Emotion*, 29(3), 416-431. doi:10.1080/02699931.2014.917070

**SUMMARY:** Mother-child communication about emotions may relate to children's anxiety symptoms. By observing how mother-child dyads discussed conflicting issues, the study examined whether children's anxiety symptoms were associated with certain aspects of mothers' and children's behaviors. Results revealed that both mother's and child's emotion communication behaviors (e.g., supportiveness, engagement in the conversation) explained the severity of child anxiety.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Mothers of more anxious children were less supportive, and showed more controlling behaviors, such as trying to manipulate their children's feelings.
- Anxious children showed more communication problems such as less engagement in the conversation and greater affect intensity.
- The pattern of associations between parenting and child anxiety was similar for boys and girls.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Work with military parents to help them determine specific changes in parenting practices and parenting styles that may have a significant impact on child well-being
- Support parents whose children are diagnosed with anxiety disorders by teaching them effective parenting skills and optimal parenting styles

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Design curricula for military parents to increase their parenting skills and foster healthy parent-child relationships
- Encourage military families to focus on increasing positive communication among family members

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families regarding the impact supportive and warm parenting can have on children's mental health
- Continue to support the development of programs that aim to increase positive parenting in military families

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## METHODS

- Children were recruited from both local schools and mental health clinics so that a full range of anxiety symptoms were represented.
- Child anxiety symptoms were self-reported, and the mother-child interaction during an eight-minute conflict conversation was videotaped and coded to examine variables such as mother's psychological control, warmth, and interest in the child, and child's intensity of affect and engagement in the conversation.
- Data were analyzed to determine whether aspects of mother-child communication related to child anxiety symptoms.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 87 mother-child dyads; 39 of the children were male, and 48 were female.
- The average age of the children was 11.32 years (SD = 0.68, age range = 10.17-12.83 years).
- Most of the children were White (67%), followed by Black (17%), Multiracial (9%), Native American (6%), and Latino (1%).

## LIMITATIONS

- The mother-child interaction task was carried out in the laboratory, therefore mothers' and children's emotion expressions may be suppressed due to social desirability bias.
- The cross-sectional design of the study limited the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relation between parent-child interaction and child anxiety.
- Children's anxiety symptoms were self-reported, therefore their anxiety levels could potentially be exaggerated or understated.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether father-child interactions will have an effect on children's anxiety symptoms
- Observe parent-child interactions in the home or naturalistic environment
- Use both parent-report and self-report methods to measure children's anxiety symptoms

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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