

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Which Fearful Toddlers Should We Worry About? Context, Fear Regulation, and Anxiety Risk

Buss, K. A (2011). Which fearful toddlers should we worry about? Context, fear regulation, and anxiety risk. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(3), 804-819. doi:10.1037/a0023227

**SUMMARY:** Survey data were used to explore whether expressing fear in situations low in threat at age two predicted the risk for developing anxiety by the start of kindergarten. Results supported the prediction such that it is not how much fear is expressed, but when the fear is expressed and how it is expressed that is important for characterizing adaptive behavior. Early intervention for children displaying a dysregulated fear profile may reduce the risk of later developing anxiety.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The normative fear profile (90% of sample) showed the hypothesized pattern of increasing fear as threat increased.
- The dysregulated fear profile (10% of sample) was composed of toddlers who had higher levels of fear in situations of lower threat (relative to the moderate- to high-threat episodes).
- A dysregulated fear profile was associated with higher anxiety in preschool (as reported by mothers and teachers) and social withdrawal in kindergarten.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Develop modules regarding early predictors of anxiety and educate military parents about ways to support children with dysregulated fear profiles
- Facilitate support groups for families coping with anxiety issues

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide early screening and identification of fear dysregulation in military children
- Offer prevention and early intervention to military children during the pre-school years to help decrease the likelihood of anxiety disorders later

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening for fear dysregulation in early childhood be added to wellness checks in contexts such as health care and school settings for military children
- Continue to support program that support military families coping with anxiety within their children

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited via mailed letters, which described the study; those interested in participating were asked to return an enclosed postcard.
- Toddlers at age two were assessed each year through the fall of their kindergarten year.
- Observational data were collected by researchers and a second-by-second micro-coding system was used to score the children's emotional and behavioral expressions. Mothers and teachers also completed survey measures.

## PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred eleven low-risk 24-month-old toddlers (range: 18–30 months) were included in this study.
- The sample was ethnically homogeneous: 90% White, 4% Black, 4% Latino/Latina, 2% Asian-American, 1% Native American.
- Fifty-five percent of toddlers were male; the majority of caregivers were mothers (percentage not given).

## LIMITATIONS

- There was some participant attrition at follow-up, which could bias results.
- This was a small sample of predominantly White, intact, middle-class families, limiting the generalizability of these findings.
- Parents may have been trying to respond in a socially desirable way, biasing results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate these findings in a larger and more demographically diverse sample, and with a sample of military children
- Test whether children's anxiety continues as they become more familiar with teachers and adapt to the classroom
- Explore whether a child's level of anxiety is impacted by parents level of anxiety

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>