



Interpretation and Expectation in Childhood Anxiety Disorders: Age Effects and Social Specificity

Creswell, C., Murray, L., & Cooper, P. (2014). Interpretation and expectation in childhood anxiety disorders: Age effects and social specificity. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 42, 453-465. doi: 10.1007/s10802-013-9795-z.



Civilian-Focused Article



120 children (ages 7-12 years old) with and without anxiety disorders participated in a multi-method study aimed at evaluating group differences related to negative thinking styles across the developmental period. Results revealed relatively few differences in thinking styles between anxious and non-anxious children in middle childhood. However, older anxious children perceived less ability to cope with potentially challenging situations than non-anxious children.

Key Findings:

- Contrary to expectations, there were no differences between anxious and non-anxious children related to threat interpretation at any age.
- Older (10-12 year old) anxious children anticipated lower levels of perceived coping than non-anxious children.
- There was little support for the cognitive content specificity hypothesis, the idea that there would be increased cognitive distortions related to social contexts for socially anxious but not non-socially anxious children.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could incorporate content in their curricula to enhance children's confidence and positive expectations about their ability to cope with challenging or stressful situations (e.g., a parent's deployment).
- Programs could work with parents to identify children who may be particularly concerned about their ability to cope with a Service member's absence. Program staff could teach parents about how to effectively support their children surrounding these issues.

Implications for Policies:

- The mental health status of Service members' children could be routinely monitored in order to allow for early identification and intervention for mental health concerns.
- Policies could recommend outreach and services to strengthen resilience among Service members and their children, helping them successfully manage challenges associated with deployment and other stressors.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could include a broader range of anxiety disorder-relevant tasks, evaluate additional types of cognitive distortions, or assess changes in cognitive styles related to treatment.
- Future research could identify developmental factors that contribute to lower perceived control among older anxious children compared to younger anxious children.

Background Information

Methodology:

- Children referred to a children's anxiety clinic and healthy community volunteer children (and their parents) completed a multi-method study.
- Participants completed 1) diagnostic interviews, 2) surveys about psychological characteristics (e.g., anxiety, behavioral problems) and expectations regarding social and non-social challenge tasks, and 3) ambiguous hypothetical and "in vivo" laboratory tasks.
- Multivariate analyses of covariance were used to evaluate group differences in threat and coping (i.e., negative emotions and perceived control) related to the ambiguous and in vivo tasks.

Participants:

- 120 British children aged 7-12 participated in the study; 80 children referred to a child anxiety clinic (40 diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, 40 with another anxiety disorder), and 40 non-referred children (no anxiety disorder).
- 53% girls; primarily White (>73% across groups).
- Most (70%) of the referred (anxious) children had comorbid diagnoses.

Limitations:

- High rates of comorbid mood and behavioral disorders increase ecological validity but may obscure group differences in cognitive distortions specifically related to anxiety.
- The data are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to draw causal conclusions about changes in cognitive styles across middle childhood.
- The study included a relatively small sample of primarily White, British children, limiting generalizability.

Assessing Research that Works

Research Design and Sample					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)		
The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Research Methods					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)		
The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Limitations					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent <i>Minor Limitations</i> (★★★)	Appropriate <i>Few Limitations</i> (★★★)	Limited <i>Several Limitations</i> (★★★)	Questionable <i>Many/Severe Limitations</i> (★★★)		
The limitations of this study are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Implications					Quality Rating:	N/A
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)		
The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
☒ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications						
Overall Quality Rating						★ ★ ★