

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

A Model-Based Cluster Analysis of Social Experiences in Clinically Anxious Youth: Links to Emotional Functioning

Suveg, C., Jacob, M. L., Whitehead, M., Jones, A., & Kingery, J. N. (2014). A model-based cluster analysis of social experiences in clinically anxious youth: Links to emotional functioning *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping: An International Journal*, 27(5), 494-508. doi:10.1080/10615806.2014.890712

SUMMARY: Sixty-four children with a primary diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, and/or generalized anxiety disorder and their parents and teachers participated in a study to examine patterns of social experiences in clinically anxious children. Three patterns of social experience were found in these children: average (no impairment in social functioning), unaware (high parent/teacher reports of social problems but average scores on child self-report measures), and victimized and lonely (children reporting overt loneliness and feeling victimized).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children with diagnosed anxiety disorders were classified into three categories: average (69%), unaware (19%), and victimized and lonely (13%).
- Children in the average group were children whose social functioning was good based on parent, teacher, and child reports; these children experienced better overall adjustment.
- Unaware children reported their own social functioning as better than what their parents and teachers reported; these children were more likely to have difficulty regulating their emotions.
- Victimized and lonely children reported experiencing high levels of bullying and loneliness; these children tended to have more adjustment problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Provide youth with anxiety disorders additional support during program participation, with particular attention to any bullying of these youth
- Work with youth to help them develop skills to interact with peers who may experience high levels of anxiety

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide supportive classes for parents that address the impact of bullying for military youth
- Teach young people strategies for managing fear and anxiety associated with bullying

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with military families regarding bullying
- Encourage the development and evaluation of programs for youth in military families that aim to decrease bullying

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METHODS

- Flyers were posted in a variety of community locations to recruit youth aged seven to twelve years old with a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder who were not currently taking medications for mental health disorders and who were not currently receiving therapy.
- Parents, youth, and one of the youth's teachers completed measures of the child's emotion regulation and behavior.
- Data were analyzed to determine patterns of social behavior in anxious children and associations with a variety of outcomes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 64 children (60% boys) with an average age of 9 years old (SD = 2 years).
- Of the parents, 75% were married, and 57% had household income over \$70,000/year.
- The sample included 86% White children, 6% Black children, and 2% Asian American children.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample size was relatively small and homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic diversity, so results may not be generalizable to other populations.
- Youth were not currently receiving medication or therapy for mental health conditions, so these results may not be applicable to groups of youth who are receiving such treatment.
- While adjustment or lack thereof may be caused by the youth's pattern of social functioning, it may also be the case that the adjustment causes the pattern of social functioning; these data do not differentiate between the two explanations.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study using a larger and more diverse sample
- Utilize observations to examine the social experiences of youth with anxiety disorders
- Examine the developmental trajectories of youth with anxiety disorders using a longitudinal design

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