

In the Eye of the Beholder: Parent Perceptions More Highly Predict their Accommodations of Child Anxiety than Naturalistic Observations

Lindsay R. Druskin¹, Kelly A. Smith¹, Danielle R. Novick¹, Hailey M. Fleece¹, Stephanie N. Pham¹, Andrea Chronis-Tuscano¹, & Kenneth H. Rubin¹

¹*University of Maryland, College Park*

Researchers have found that parental perceptions of child attributes impact how parents interact with their children (Mills & Rubin, 1990). Observed child behavior predicts parenting; for example, observed behavioral inhibition (BI) has been shown to predict oversolicitous parenting (Rubin et al., 1997).

One important parenting behavior is parental accommodation (PA), which describes adjustments that parents make to relieve child distress in anxiety-provoking situations. Most PA research has focused on children with identified symptoms of psychological disorders; yet, little is known about the relative significance of parents' perceptions of children's anxiety symptoms and observable child anxiety behaviors in predicting PA in an unselected population. Recently, researchers have elucidated the negative outcomes associated with PA, especially in an anxious population (Kagan et al., 2016). For example, the transactional nature of PA has been shown to increase child anxiety symptom severity (Lebowitz et al., 2013) and worsen treatment outcomes as both parent and child factors contribute to the maintenance of child anxiety (Thompson-Hollands et al., 2014). Examining an unselected sample of children provides an opportunity to test whether parent-perceived child anxiety symptoms are differentially associated with PA compared with the objective appraisal of such symptoms in naturalistic settings. It is critical to identify factors that elicit maladaptive parenting known to increase symptom severity to inform anxiety prevention and intervention efforts.

Participants included 83 children (48% male, $M_{age} = 53.46$ months, $SD_{age} = 5.33$) and their parents (92% female). Parent-reported child BI in peer contexts was measured using the Behavioral Inhibition Questionnaire-Peers (Bishop et al., 2003). PA was reported using the Family Accommodation Scale-Anxiety (Lebowitz et al., 2013). Observers used the Play Observation Scale (Rubin, 2001) to code children's reticence (unoccupied or onlooking behaviors) and social play in 10-second blocks during free play in preschool. Observations occurred on two different days for 30 minutes each. Teachers reported on child anxiety in preschool using the Child Behavior Scale (Ladd et al., 1996).

Observed reticence and social play, teacher-reported anxiety, and parent-reported BI were not significantly correlated across informants, except a marginally significant association between observed reticence and teacher-reported anxiety ($r = .191, p = .084$). Observed reticence ($r = .017, p = .892$) and social play ($r = .030, p = .810$) and teacher-reported anxiety ($r = .085, p = .493$) were not significantly correlated with PA, but parent-reported BI was positively correlated ($r = .342, p = .005$). Saturated path models with robust standard errors, controlling for child gender, revealed that higher perceived BI was related to high levels of parent-reported accommodation even in models controlling for observed reticence ($b = 0.137, p = .002$), observed social play ($b = 0.138, p = .001$), or teacher-reported anxiety ($b = 0.136, p = .002$). Observed reticence and social play and teacher-reported anxiety did not significantly predict PA (all $p > .600$). These findings suggest that parents' perceptions of child BI in response to peers motivates more accommodating behaviors. Parents' perceptions of child vulnerability, rather than objective observations of child behaviors, were significantly related to higher levels of PA. These findings suggest that, in some cases, reducing PA may be best accomplished by helping parents to develop a realistic, developmentally-appropriate understanding of childhood anxiety symptoms.

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Child sex	-0.136	0.112	.222
Parent-perceived Anxiety	0.137	0.043	.002
Observed Reticence	0.021	0.431	.962

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Child sex	-0.141	0.108	.193
Parent-perceived Anxiety	0.138	0.043	.001
Observed Social Play	0.128	0.246	.601

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Child sex	-0.134	0.108	.213
Parent-perceived Anxiety	0.136	0.044	.002
Teacher-reported Anxiety	0.017	0.110	.875

References

- Bishop, G., Spence, S. H., McDonald, C. (2003). Can parents and teachers provide a reliable and valid report of behavioral inhibition? *Child Development, 74*, 1899-1917. doi:10.1046/j.1467-8624.2003.00645.x
- Kagan, E. R., Peterman, J. S., Carper, M. M., & Kendall, P. C. (2016). Accommodation and treatment of anxious youth. *Depression & Anxiety, 33*, 840-847. doi:10.1002/da.22520
- Lebowitz, E. R., Woolston, J., Bar-Haim, Y., Calvocoressi, L., Dauser, C., Warnick, E., et al. (2013). Family accommodation in pediatric anxiety disorders. *Depression & Anxiety, 30*, 47-54. doi:10.1002/da.21998
- Mills, R. S. L. & Rubin, K. H. (1990). Parental beliefs about problematic social behaviors in early childhood. *Child Development, 61*, 138-151. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1990.tb02767.x
- Thompson-Hollands, J. T., Kerns, C. E., Pincus, D. B., & Comer, J. S. (2014). Parental accommodation of child anxiety and related symptoms: Range, impact, and correlates. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 28*, 765-773. doi: 10.1016/j.janxdis.2014.09.007
- Rubin, K. H., Hastings, P. D., Stewart, S. L., Henderson, H. A., & Chen, X. (1997). The consistency and concomitants of inhibition: Some of the children, all of the time. *Child Development, 68*, 467-473. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1997.tb01952.x
- Rubin, K. H. (2001) The Play Observation Scale (POS). *Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture, University of Maryland.*