

Longitudinal investigation of the role of temperament and stressful life events in childhood anxiety

What was the aim of the study?

The aim of the study was to determine whether stress and childhood behavioural inhibition contribute to the development of a childhood anxiety disorders. Behavioural inhibition is a temperament observed in young children, which includes exceptional shyness and a tendency to respond in unfamiliar situations with hesitation, fear and avoidance.

How did we do it?

The study took place over a 5-year period with a sample of 202 children (ages 3-4yrs) with or without behavioural inhibition. Parents completed interviews and questionnaires about their child's behavioural inhibition, the presence of different types of stressful life events and anxiety symptoms several times over the 5 year period.

What did we find?

The researchers found that the child's behavioural inhibition and life events were both risk factors in the development of anxiety problems later on. However, these two risk factors did not interact. That means that behavioural inhibition did not depend on stressful life events to predict the occurrence of childhood anxiety problems. Both behavioural inhibition and stressful life events independently predicted the onset of childhood anxiety disorders. The researchers also found interesting results based on the type of stressful life events experienced by the child. For instance, negative life events connected to the child's own behaviours (e.g., fighting with parents and friends) predicted a greater likelihood of developing anxiety problems. In comparison, stressful life events that were unconnected to the child's behaviours (e.g., car accidents, natural disasters) did not predict the onset of anxiety problems later in the child's life. Finally, it seems that behaviourally inhibited children experienced fewer positive life events, especially behaviour-dependent positive life events, compared to behaviourally uninhibited children.

What does this mean in practice?

Clinicians often discuss how events trigger thoughts which then lead to feelings of anxiety in children and associated unhelpful behaviours (i.e. avoidance). However, the events described are often expressed as independent of the child and therefore, it is not surprising that within a clinical setting children and families often report feeling a lack of control over stressful events. One possible solution is to increase awareness that the child's behaviour can drive future negative events, and increase their chances of developing anxiety problems. For example, a child who continues to turn down party invitations because of excessive shyness will eventually be left off the invitation list and feel excluded from friendship circles. This may then worsen feelings of social anxiety because the child is deprived of opportunities to engage in positive social interactions like parties. The study has the potential to inform frameworks for interventions that could interrupt the chronic course of anxiety disorders early in life.

Citation details

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