

Child involvement, alliance and therapist flexibility: Process variables in cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety disorders in children

What was the aim of the study?

To determine how child involvement, therapist flexibility and changes within the child client/therapist relationship impact upon the success of CBT outcomes for the treatment of children with anxiety.

How did we do it?

Independent raters observed audio visual recordings of 151 children aged between 6-14 years during cognitive behavioural therapy sessions. The raters assessed the strength of the child and therapist alliance (i.e. the relationship/bond between the therapist and child), child involvement in the therapy process, the therapist's flexibility and functionality within the therapy process.

Children chosen for the study met DSM criteria for a primary diagnosis of generalised anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, or social phobia or panic disorder. Eighty-eight percent of children had a comorbid anxiety disorder.

In addition to audio visual observation, the results also included analysis of data scores provided by the clinician, mother, father, child and teacher through interviews and questionnaires.

What did we find?

As might be expected, children had better outcomes following psychological therapy when the child was engaged in treatment and had a positive relationship with the therapist. The child and therapist relationship reaches its peak mid-treatment at session 8 and 9 (assuming a 16 session course of therapy) with child involvement and therapist flexibility both at their highest levels at this time. The study also found the more engaged the child was in the initial therapy sessions the higher degree of flexibility displayed by the therapist.

Interestingly, the finding that alliance (i.e. the strength of the bond between the therapist and child) and involvement were related to outcome was not consistently shown across all measures. So not as strong an effect as one would anticipate.

What does this mean in practice?

For best therapeutic results it's important to cement a bond with the child client early in the therapy process. Early therapist efforts to demonstrate warmth, empathy and synchrony are associated with greater youth engagement in treatment activities and openness to the relationship. Flexibly delivering evidenced based treatment manuals is also associated with increased child involvement.

Citation details

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