

An Investigation into the lower peer liking of anxious than nonanxious children

What was the aim?

Research studies have shown that children who are anxious are liked less than their peers who are not anxious. This study aimed to determine whether the relationship between the perceived anxiety of a child and lower peer liking might be affected by one of these factors – perceived physical attractiveness, self-disclosure, perceived similarity to another, reciprocation of liking, attitude of one's peer group, and evoked social discomfort. We also wanted to understand why children who exhibit anxious behaviours can be so quickly disliked by their peers.

How did we do it?

Child actors delivered an identical verbal presentation: once in an anxious manner and once confidently. The videos were rated for liking and potential mediators by three groups of children: 32 anxiety-disordered peers with social phobia; 16 anxiety-disordered peers without social phobia; and 48 nonclinical peers.

What did we find?

As predicted, we found that anxious actors were liked less than confident actors. The degree of how much the anxious actor was liked less than the confident actor differed by the status of the rater. Children who did not have clinical anxiety disliked the anxious actors more than the children who had social phobia.

Across all group raters (ie. children with no anxiety, with anxiety, and with social phobia) the anxious actors were less liked than the confident actors because they were perceived as less physically attractive than the confident actors and because the peer raters expected that the anxious actors might be less accepted by their friends.

There is emerging evidence which suggests that children with social phobia might be more impaired by their anxiety disorder (such as lower social competence, fewer friends and difficulty making new friends) than those children with generalised anxiety. Children with generalised anxiety did not differ from nonclinical children with regards to the likelihood of having a best friend, participation in groups or social competence.

What does this mean in practice?

Given friend acceptance is important for children, we could focus interventions to help improve the first impressions made by children with anxiety disorders. In particular, these results suggest that existing treatments may need to be modified and tailored for anxious children with social phobia.

Citation

Baker, J.R, Hudson, J.L, Taylor, A. (2014) An investigation into the lower peer liking of anxious than nonanxious children, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 28 pg599-611