

Maternal expectancy versus objective measures of child skill: evidence for absence of positive bias in mother's expectations of children with internalising disorders

What Was the Aim?

We wanted to determine if mothers of non-anxious children are more likely to have a positive bias of their child's aptitude and coping ability (i.e. over rate their child's ability) in a stressful situation compared with parents of anxious or anxious-depressed children.

How Did We Do It

We asked 43 clinically anxious, 30 clinically anxious/depressed and 44 non-clinical control children to perform a speech (i.e. the stressful task). Prior to the children performing their stressful task, we asked the parents of both anxious and non-anxious children to rate how their child would perform in the situation. Whilst the child was performing the stressful task, we asked an objective observer to rate the child's performance using the same measures as the parents did to rate their children. We then compared ratings between the objective observer and the parent.

What Did We Find?

We found that mothers of non-clinically anxious children held a positive bias (i.e. over rated their child's performance). Mothers of clinically anxious children did not hold a positive bias but they also did not hold a negative bias, in fact, they held an accurate expectation of their child's ability. They expected that their child would perform worse than their peers and predicted accurately lower scores on the speech rating which was in line with the objective observer's ratings.

What Does this Mean in Practice?

These findings show that parents of children with anxiety and mood problems are not overly pessimistic but rather realistic about their child's abilities which disputes evidence from earlier studies. Although we are unable to determine causality in this study, the results suggest that overly positive expectations about one's child are associated with better child emotional health. The question that needs to be tested in further research is whether holding a positive bias is actually more functional, in the case of childrearing. In cognitive behavioural therapy, we encourage parents of anxious children to be more realistic in their interpretations. Our results allude to the intriguing possibility that perhaps we should encourage positive rather than realistic interpretations about a child's ability.

Citation Details

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