

Childhood anxiety can be prevented with early intervention

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A team of researchers from Macquarie University has found that early intervention with parents of children at risk for anxiety and related disorders can potentially make the difference in whether a child will go on to develop anxiety-related illnesses later.

Their findings were recently published in the online advance copy of the prestigious [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) which comes out in December.

The study, led by Dr. Ron Rapee, Director of the Centre for Emotional Health at Macquarie University, also showed that three years after parents received the intervention, their children were still showing lower frequency and severity of [anxiety disorders](#).

Anxiety disorders are among the most common forms of mental illness in early to middle childhood. Developmentally, the common pattern is for anxiety to precede depression. Depression begins to show a dramatic increase around middle adolescence with children and adolescents, who already have an anxiety disorder, at greater risk of developing depression during adolescence and early adulthood.

However, Rapee and the research team found that with a parent-focused intervention at an early stage when children first begin to exhibit characteristics of anxiety, the trajectory can be reversed.

Dr. Rapee said the treatment program is relatively inexpensive and

simple.

“It’s a program that governments and community groups can invest in,” he said.

The characteristics seen in children at risk of developing anxiety include behaviour inhibition, social withdrawal and shyness. These children are at greater risk for later internalising distress and more specifically developing anxiety disorders, Dr. Rapee said.

Several factors seem to be involved in the development of childhood anxiety. Twin studies point to a clear genetic risk in addition to [environmental factors](#). Parental factors in childhood anxiety both through the influence of the parents’ own anxiety and through parent-child interactions also play a role.

Provided by Macquarie University

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