

Kids' anxiety, depression halved when parenting styled to personality

August 1 2011

When it comes to rearing children, just about any parent will say that what works with one kid might not work with another. Parents use all sorts of strategies to keep kids from being cranky, grumpy, fearful or moody, while encouraging them to be independent and well-adjusted.

But which parenting styles work best with which [kids](#)? A study by University of Washington psychologists provides advice about tailoring parenting to children's personalities.

At the end of the three-year study, the [psychologists](#) found that the right match between parenting styles and the child's personality led to half as many [depression](#) and anxiety symptoms in school-aged children. But mismatches led to twice as many depression and anxiety symptoms during the same three years.

The study was published online Aug. 1 in the [Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology](#).

"This study moves away from the one-size-fits-all approach to parenting, and gives specific advice to parents on how to mitigate their child's [anxiety and depression](#)," said Cara Kiff, lead author and psychology resident at the UW School of Medicine. "We're considering characteristics that make children vulnerable to anxiety and depression, and factoring in how that shapes how kids react to different parenting approaches."

"We hear a lot about over-involved parents, like 'tiger moms' and 'helicopter parents,'" said co-author Liliana Lengua, a UW [psychology professor](#). "It is parents' instinct to help and support their children in some way, but it's not always clear how to intervene in the best way. This research shows that parenting is a balance between stepping in and stepping out with guidance, support and structure based on cues from kids."

Kiff, Lengua and Nicole Bush, a co-author and postdoctoral fellow at University of California, San Francisco's Center for Health and Community, studied interactions between 214 children and their mothers during interviews at home. An almost even mix of boys and girls participated in the study and were, on average, 9 years old when the study began.

The children and their mothers met with the researchers once a year. The researchers observed as the pairs discussed neutral topics, such as a recap of the day's events, and common problems, like conflicts over homework and chores. During the conversations, the researchers noted [parenting styles](#), including warmth and hostility, and how much mothers allowed their child to guide the conversations – an autonomy-granting parenting style.

The researchers also measured the children's anxiety and depression symptoms and evaluated their personality characteristics. They paid particular attention to effortful control, the kids' abilities to regulate their own emotions and actions, which is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety.

At the end of the three-year study, the researchers found that

- Children with greater effortful control had fewer symptoms of

anxiety and depression compared with other kids in the study, and those symptoms usually remained low regardless of parenting style.

- When children were higher in effortful control but their parents used higher levels of guidance or provided little autonomy, those children showed higher levels of depression and anxiety.
- Children with low effortful control had less anxiety when mothers provided more structuring and less autonomy.
- Children low in effortful control doubled their anxiety symptoms if they had mothers who provided little control.

Lengua, who is also the director of the UW Center for Child and Family Well-Being, said the study shows how parents can use their child's personality and temperament to decide how much and what type of help to give. For some kids, particularly those who have trouble regulating their emotions, more help is good. But for kids who have pretty good self-control, too much parental control can lead to more anxiety and depression.

The results were somewhat surprising, Lengua said, because parents of children at this age are typically told to give their kids more autonomy as they learn to navigate social situations and make decisions about schedules and homework. This can butt against parents' intuition to assist kids through trickier situations.

"[Parents](#) should be there to help – but not take over – in difficult situations and help their [children](#) learn to navigate challenges on their own," Lengua said.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Kids' anxiety, depression halved when parenting styled to personality (2011, August 1)

retrieved 1 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-08-kids-anxiety-depression-halved-parenting.html>

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