

Mothers and OCD children trapped in rituals have impaired relationships

April 10 2012

A new study from Case Western Reserve University finds mothers tend to be more critical of children with obsessive-compulsive disorder than they are of other children in the family. And, that parental criticism is linked to poorer outcomes for the child after treatment.

Parent criticism has been associated with [child](#) anxiety in the past, however, researchers wanted to find out if this is a characteristic of the parent or something specific to the relationship between the anxious child and the parent.

"This suggests that [mothers](#) of [anxious children](#) are not overly critical [parents](#) in general. Instead they seem to be more critical of a child with OCD than they are of other [children](#) in the home," said Amy Przeworski, assistant professor of [psychology](#). She is the lead author of the study, "Maternal and Child Expressed Emotion as Predictors of [Treatment Response](#) in Pediatric [Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder](#)," in the recent journal, *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*.

OCD is found in one in 200 children, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The psychological disorder overcomes individuals with repetitive thoughts that lead to anxiety, which is then acted out in exacting routines or behaviors that can range from foot tapping to eating rituals to school or bedtime preparations.

This research evolved from other studies that found parental criticism is

associated with less success in therapy and a relapse of behavior.

"Parents' criticism may be a reaction to the child's anxiety. This research is not blaming the parent for the child's OCD. But it does suggest that the relationship between parents and children with OCD is important and should be a focus of treatment. This means that parents can help children with OCD to get better." Przeworski says.

"OCD sneaks up on the kids and parents," Przeworski says.

The psychology professor, who specializes in anxiety disorders, says some parents become concerned when their children show some early warning signs for OCD:

- Rigidity in a child, with things routinely done or said in exactly the same way or order.
- Asking for reassurance many times in the day.
- Repetition of a task from tapping the foot, checking on the stove, washing hands that the child cannot stop when asked.
- Routines that have prescribed patterns or are excessive lengthy: An example is a two-hour shower or raw and chapped hands that look like the child is wearing red gloves.
- Bedtime or dinner rituals, where there is a prescribed order for eating food, placement of food on the plate, etc.
- Temper tantrums where the child goes beyond being stubborn but has anxiety associated with them.
- Children want symmetry in appearance or things around them.

Parents initially may think it is a phase, a habit or stubbornness. Over time, the behaviors become so exacting that the child and family members have to act in prescribed ways. Parents may end up criticizing the child in an effort to get them to drop obsessive-compulsive

behaviors.

The researchers videotaped interviews with 62 mother-child pairs just before the child's OCD treatment began. Children either had medication, therapy, a combination of the two, or a placebo. The children were between the ages of 7 and 17.

Because most mothers bring their children for treatment appointments, the researchers focused on the mother's view of their children. Mothers were asked to give a five-minute description of their relationship with the child with OCD and the mother's [relationship](#) with the sibling closest in age to the child with OCD. The researchers asked the children to describe their relationships with their mothers and fathers.

The researchers examined the presence of criticism and emotional over-involvement (over-protection or excessive self-sacrificing) in these descriptions. The tone of the OCD child and parent tended toward criticism, they said. The other sibling received more loving expressions. Parent criticism was associated with poorer child functioning after treatment.

Przeworski said treatment of [OCD](#) has good results, but many times parents misjudge these rigid routines as stubbornness or "just going through a phase" until the behavior takes over family life. Then parents realize the behavior requires therapy.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

Citation: Mothers and OCD children trapped in rituals have impaired relationships (2012, April 10) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-04-mothers-ocd-children-rituals-impaired.html>

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