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Parents look on the bright side of kids' worries, study finds

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Parents consistently overestimate their children's optimism and downplay their worries, according to new research by psychologists at the University of California, Davis, Center for Mind and Brain.

The findings suggest that secondhand evaluations by parents or other adults of children's emotional well-being need to be treated with caution.

Many psychologists and researchers have long held that children under the age of seven cannot accurately report how they feel, said Kristin Lagattuta, associate professor of psychology at UC Davis, who led the study. So behavioral scientists frequently rely on the impressions of parents, teachers and other adults.

However, several studies have shown that parents think their kids are smarter than they really are—for example, parents often overestimate how well their children will perform on math, language or other cognitive tests.

"We thought this 'positivity bias' also might apply to how parents perceive their children's emotional well-being," Lagattuta said.

Lagattuta, with Liat Sayfan, a postdoctoral researcher at the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain, and Christi Bamford, a former graduate student at UC Davis, made the discovery while conducting larger studies on individual differences in children's social reasoning.

Rather than rely just on parent questionnaires, the researchers decided to assess kids' views of their own emotions.

They developed a picture-based rating scale that children could use to rate how often they felt different kinds of emotions. The team got the children used to the scale with basic questions such as how often they eat a particular food or wear clothes of a particular color.

In three separate studies involving more than 500 children ages 4 through 11, they found that parents consistently rated their children as being less worried and more optimistic than the children rated themselves.

The questions involved common childhood anxieties such as being scared of the dark, or worries about something bad happening to a family member.

Lagattuta and her colleagues also found that parents' own emotions biased not only how they perceived their children's emotions, but also the degree of discrepancy between the parent and child reports.

The fact that there was a difference between adults and children in rating both anxiety and optimism showed that there wasn't a simple effect of children giving themselves higher scores for everything, Lagattuta said. Instead, children consistently provided higher ratings than parents when reporting their worries and lower ratings than parents when evaluating their feelings of optimism.

Previous research with parents suffering from anxiety or depression have shown that parents' own emotions influence how they evaluate their children's feelings, Lagattuta added. The current findings show that this is a mainstream phenomenon not specific to adults with mood disorders.

The results do not invalidate previous work involving parent reports of children's emotions, Lagattuta said. But they do show that secondhand evaluations by parents or other adults need to be treated with care. Ideally, researchers should get emotion reports of children from multiple sources, including the child, Lagattuta said.

Awareness of this parental positivity bias may also encourage adults to be more attuned to emotional difficulties children may be facing, she noted.

The findings are published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

Provided by UC Davis