

Shy babies need secure parent bond to help prevent potential teen anxiety

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Shy babies need to have a strong bond with their parents to avoid developing anxiety disorders in their teens, according to a new study co-authored at the University of Waterloo.

It's been known for some time that [young children](#) who react with behavioral inhibition or shyness to new situations have an increased risk

of internalizing problems as they grow older. "But with this study," said co-author, Professor Heather Henderson, "we now understand that infants and young children with an inhibited temperament who also have insecure early attachment relationships are most likely to become socially anxious teens - especially boys."

Attachment is especially vital, the researchers found, when a baby shows behavioural inhibition or shyness to new situations or people. Their paper appears in *Child Development*, the journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

This is the first long-term empirical study of the combined influence of attachment and behavioural inhibition as predictors of teen anxiety. While the researchers found that behavioural inhibition was associated with higher anxiety when toddlers also had insecure attachment relationships, this association was particularly strong for boys in the study.

Professor Henderson and her collaborators say further study is needed to understand how a child's gender influences development of anxiety.

"The most important message from this study is that competent responsive parents who form a secure relationship with their young children, can be an extremely important protective factor in their child's development," said Professor Henderson

The longitudinal study, conducted by Professor Henderson of the Department of Psychology at Waterloo, and collaborators at the University of Maryland and the National Institute of Mental Health, included 165 adolescents aged 14 to 17 from middle-to-upper class European American families who had been periodically assessed throughout early childhood beginning at 4 months old, and later, as adolescents, completed a number of anxiety assessments.

Toddlers' attachment to parents was measured using the Strange Situation Paradigm which includes a series of separation and reunion episodes with their mothers. The toddler's behaviour, particularly during reunion episodes was observed and coded in order to form attachment classifications. Toddlers who quickly approached the parent, were easily soothed and were willing to return to exploring the room were classified as secure. In contrast, toddlers who avoided contact, or showed anger and unmoderated distress, or other types of atypical response upon the parent's return, were classified as insecure.

Behavioural inhibition, the other factor in this study, was repeatedly assessed over early and middle childhood using laboratory observations and maternal report measures. Assessments focus on the toddler and then young child's reaction to unfamiliar objects, people or situations. If they repeatedly respond with fear or social withdrawal, they are classified as behaviourally inhibited.

"Anxiety disorders are among the most common psychiatric problems seen in children and adolescents," says Professor Henderson, "we can use this information about early influences to help change the developmental pathways of at-risk children before clinically-significant problems emerge."

More information: *Child Development*, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12336/full

Provided by University of Waterloo

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