

Study to look at shy infants who may grow into anxious adults

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Penn State's Cognition, Affect, and Temperament and Lab studies how children respond to social and emotional situations in their lives. Credit: Pennsylvania State University

Infants who are overly shy and scared of new things may be at risk for developing anxiety later in life. Penn State researchers are looking to

help by learning more about what these children are experiencing and why in a new project being funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

Koraly Pérez-Edgar, associate professor of psychology and one of three principal investigators for the multi-site project, says that while previous research has shown that extreme shyness is associated with the development of anxiety as the child grows, there has never been a comprehensive assessment of this relationship from infancy into toddlerhood.

Pérez-Edgar, who also runs the University's Cognition, Affect, and Temperament Lab, is driven to learn how kids move in their social environment and how they view the world. "Our goal is to assess behavioral inhibition, which is the tendency to withdraw from unfamiliar situations, people and environments. It can often lead to anxiety in adulthood, particularly social anxiety."

The researchers will study how attention patterns differ in [infants](#) due to factors such as their biology, environment, and parental behaviors during the first two years. They will recruit families in three sites, matching the demographic characteristics of each of the surrounding communities and enrolling an equal number of male and female infants.

In State College, Pérez-Edgar will recruit families identified by the Families Interested in Research (FIRSt) database, which connects Penn State researchers and families with infants and young children in central Pennsylvania who are interested in participating in research. Infants will be brought into the University's Child Study Center starting at four months, and they will be tested every periodically until they reach the age of two.

The other two sites will follow similar guidelines, with principal

investigator Kristen Buss, professor of psychology, conducting research through Penn State's Parents and Children Together, an initiative of the Harrisburg Center for Healthy Child Development.

The third testing site will be located at Rutgers University and under the direction of Vanessa LoBue, assistant professor of psychology and third principal investigator on the project. "It will be interesting to see the commonalities and differences in what the infants are exposed to and their reactions," said Pérez-Edgar of the three testing sites.

The researchers will examine parental anxiety over threats in their child's environment and the child's psychosocial stressors and symptoms via several testing methods. Using a stationary eye tracking system, a children's video will be played depicting happy, sad, or neutral faces. Additionally, a variety of toys will be shown, including some that move or make noise. A puppet show and games of hide-and-seek are among the other planned activities.

Results will be collected via data gathered from an electroencephalogram used to track [electrical activity](#) of the brain, and an electrocardiograph which will record electrical activity of the heart. Parents will also complete questionnaires to measure parental characteristics and environmental stress in the home, along with providing a behavioral assessment of their child.

"If we can identify what is contributing to the anxiety, we can divert the child's attention away and eventually train the child to not seek out things that cause anxiety and possibly focus attention elsewhere," said Pérez-Edgar.

With this research, Pérez-Edgar is hopeful that she and her colleagues will be able to capture the early emergence of behavioral inhibition and gain further insights about how brain structure and behavior influence

each other, so they can help these children can grow into happy, well-adjusted adults.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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