

Psychology professor seeks the roots of shyness

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Credit: Rutgers University

What makes a baby grow into a shy child? Vanessa LoBue, assistant professor of psychology at RU-N, is embarking on a longitudinal study involving hundreds of babies and a battery of tasks, tests and

measurements that promise to shed light on this complex question.

LoBue specializes in infant and child emotional development. She's spent many years scaring [babies](#) and little children—or rather, observing how they react to social and non-social threats. Scientists know [anxiety](#) and fear are linked to paying [attention](#) to [threat](#), but there's still a lot unknown about the nature of that relationship.

Researchers have found adults with social anxiety will pay more attention to angry faces (a social threat) than people who don't have social anxiety. Evidence suggests [social anxiety](#) compels people to pay more attention to threats, but LoBue hypothesizes it could also work the other way around:

"Attention to threat could play an important role in the development and maintenance of anxiety. Theoretically, if you're letting in all this negative information, it may facilitate the development of anxiety," LoBue said.

Perhaps it's the attention to angry faces that precedes an infant's development of "behavioral inhibition" (i.e. shyness, psychologists do not diagnose anxiety in babies or toddlers).

LoBue and her collaborators, Kristin Buss and Bradley Taber-Thomas of Pennsylvania State University, are looking to recruit 450 babies for the study that will take place at the Infancy Studies Lab here at RU-N and also at two sites at Penn state. Participating infants will visit their respective site five times between the ages of 4 months and 24 months.

LoBue and her colleagues will use EEG and heart-rate monitoring and observe their behavior during a series of tasks (seeing a stranger, playing with mom, encountering a frustrating toy, etc.). They will also use eye-monitoring technology to see how long each baby lingers on an angry

face on a screen, and how long after seeing the angry face it takes the baby to locate another object.

LoBue's hypothesis is that babies who spend more time dwelling on [angry faces](#) will be more likely to develop behavioral inhibition as they age. A baby that dwells longer on an angry face may have a predisposition to pay attention to negative social information.

The length and breadth of the study will help researchers determine if it's a combination of factors (maybe temperamental disposition and attention to threats) that leads to behavioral inhibition. LoBue hopes if the study goes well, they might secure funding to continue following participants beyond age 2.

LoBue believes findings from the study may have practical application.

"If we find out what babies are most at risk, we may be able to intervene," she said. When she's not in the lab, LoBue also writes *The Baby Scientist*, a blog translating developmental research into layman's terms.

Before she had her son, LoBue said people wondered if she would be an anxious parent, since she'd studied developmental psychology. "It's actually the opposite," she said. "A lot of research is depicted in an alarmist way."

The Baby Scientist tackles topics like sleep-training, screen-time and whether or not letting them eat a little bit of dirt is okay—intent on allaying parental anxiety along the way.

Provided by Rutgers University

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