

Anxious moms may give clues about how anxiety develops

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Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

Moms may be notorious worriers, but babies of anxious mothers may also spend more time focusing on threats in their environment, according to a team of researchers.

In a study, researchers used eye-tracking technology to measure how

long babies spent looking at happy, neutral and angry faces. They found that the babies with anxious moms had a harder time looking away from an angry face—which they could view as a [threat](#)—than babies whose moms were not anxious.

Koraly Pérez-Edgar, professor of psychology at Penn State, said the findings—recently published in the journal *Emotion*—could help give clues about which children are at risk for developing anxiety later in life.

"Once we learn more about the pathways to anxiety, we can better predict who's at risk and hopefully help prevent them from needing treatment later on," Pérez-Edgar said. "Treatment is difficult for the child and parent, it's expensive and it doesn't always work. If we can prevent anxiety from developing, that's a whole lot better. Let's find out which kids are at the highest risk and intervene."

Previous research has found that focusing too much on threat could potentially increase anxiety, and some forms of therapy focus on turning attention away from threat as a way to lower anxiety.

"Paying too much attention to threat, even as infants, could possibly set up this cycle. The more you fixate on threat, the more opportunity you have to see the world as a threatening place, which could help lead to more anxiety," Pérez-Edgar said. "Additionally, we think that risk factors in biology and potentially mom's anxiety could also make that more likely."

To examine the relationship between a mother's anxiety and her baby's attention to threat, a research team led by Pérez-Edgar; Kristin Buss, professor of psychology at Penn State; and Vanessa Lobue, assistant professor of psychology at Rutgers University, recruited 98 babies between the ages of 4 and 24 months.

The babies' mothers answered questions about their anxiety levels, and the babies were placed in front of a screen that was equipped with an eye tracker—a strip that ran along the bottom of the monitor and followed the movement of the babies' irises using infrared.

As each baby focused on the screen, their gaze was measured while happy, neutral and angry faces appeared one at a time. Once the baby was focused on a face, a second image was flashed in their [peripheral vision](#) to distract them.

"By the time you're a few months old, a reflex develops where you'll automatically turn and look if something pops up in your peripheral vision," Pérez-Edgar said. "This became a conflict for the babies, because they were focused on the face but then had this reflex to turn and look."

The researchers found that the more anxious a baby's mother was, the more time her baby spent looking at the angry faces before turning to look at the image in their peripheral vision. This suggests that the babies with anxious moms had a harder time disengaging from a potential threat in their environment.

Additionally, the researchers found that the age of the baby did not matter. The babies with anxious moms spent a longer time looking at the angry face whether they were four or 24 months old, suggesting a potential genetic element.

"It doesn't seem like the babies are learning to pay more attention to threat from their anxious moms. If that were true, the older babies might have more trouble turning away because they've been around their moms longer than the younger babies," Pérez-Edgar said. "This seems to suggest that there may be a shared genetic or biological component."

Pérez-Edgar said the results give powerful clues about where to keep looking to learn more about how anxiety develops in children. In a future study, Pérez-Edgar, Buss and Lobue will take a closer look at how mother's [anxiety](#) affects [babies](#) over time, instead of at one instance.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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