

Alternative treatment for anxiety proves effective for the most difficult cases

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Credit: Florida International University

Helping children diagnosed with anxiety hone their attention shows promising results for recovery, according to a new study by researchers at Florida International University's Center for Children and Families.

The new study used computer-based attention training as [treatment](#) for children and adolescents who failed to respond to in-person cognitive behavior therapy, which is the most common and evidence-based psychosocial treatment for anxiety. Helping these children improve their ability to focus and shift their attention led to reductions in anxiety, according to the findings. After four weeks of the alternative treatment, 50 percent of [study participants](#) no longer met the criteria for an anxiety diagnosis.

The study is the first to provide an effective alternative treatment option for the 30 to 50 percent of children who do not respond to cognitive behavior therapy.

"There is critical need to have other [treatment options](#) available for this population given that anxiety is associated with significant distress and impairment in functioning," said lead author and Department of Psychology Chairman Jeremy W. Pettit.

The 64 participants ages 7 to 16 were selected after evaluations determined each still met criteria for an anxiety diagnosis after completing 12 to 14 sessions of cognitive behavior therapy. The researchers point out it is important to monitor progress and implement additional treatment quickly if a child is not responding to cognitive behavior therapy.

Participants received one of two forms of computer-based attention training. The first, attention bias modification treatment, trained attention toward neutral stimuli and away from threatening stimuli. The second, attention control training, trained attention to neutral and threatening stimuli equally. Both forms of attention training led to comparable reductions in anxiety.

"Attention training is a promising supplemental treatment for children

who do not respond to [cognitive behavior therapy](#)," Pettit said. "We need to conduct additional research to more clearly understand how [attention](#) training produces [anxiety](#)-reduction effects, but the results of this study give us a very promising start."

The study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and was published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

More information: Jeremy W. Pettit et al. A Randomized Controlled Trial of Attention Bias Modification Treatment in Youth With Treatment-Resistant Anxiety Disorders, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2019.02.018](#)

Provided by Florida International University

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