

The power of parental 'fear talk': Researchers explore impact of parental anxiety on children

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Parents do not want their children to run into danger or blindly trust strangers, but at the same time, they want them to discover the world and

develop trust in people. So, how should they prepare their children for new situations, objects or strangers?

"This question is also very important from a mental health perspective," says first author Cosima Nimphy. "Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental disorders in children and adolescents, and children of anxious [parents](#) are two to three times more likely to develop them. For about one-third, this is genetic, but the majority of cases are explained by environmental factors or a combination of both. So, if we want to prevent parental transmission of [fear](#) and anxiety, or find strategies to reduce fear, we need to discover the mechanisms behind it."

Find the mechanisms

To find these mechanisms, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of all relevant empirical studies are needed. A team of psychological researchers, led by Evin Aktar, searched the scientific databases, and after a thorough screening of research focus and methodology, submitted 18 [empirical studies](#)—experimental or observational—in children aged 2.5—17 years to a [systematic review](#) as well as a statistical [meta-analysis](#), now [published](#) in *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*.

"This number of 18 studies may sound small, but it is enough to measure the effect, and showcases a research field that is still growing," says Nimphy. "And the effect turned out to be strong, even after one exposure to parental verbal threat information."

The studies involved all investigated how parents' verbal fear or anxiety information about a novel person, object or situation can shape their children's reaction to these stimuli. They looked at physiological reactions (heightened heart rate), behavior (avoidance) and/or cognition (self-reported fear and avoidance by the children).

The latter aspect was overrepresented in the studies, "which should be a caveat," says Nimphy, "because children may say that they are scared, but not act scared or avoidant."

No significant effect of a parent's anxiety disorder

The researchers expected children of parents suffering from [anxiety disorders](#) to be more susceptible to their warnings about fearful situations. However, the majority (4 out of 5) of the studies that investigated this found no significant effect.

"This was surprising," says Nimphy. "But we need more studies than the five that looked into this." And it does not mean that anxious parents have no influence. Maybe repetition of social fear learning over time, rather than its intensity, strengthens children's tendency to avoid novel social stimuli or situations in anxious families."

No effect of children's own disposition

The team also expected children who already have a fearful disposition to be more sensitive to parental "fear talk." But in 3 out of the 4 studies that examined this, no significant effect was found.

"Rather than making children more susceptible to parental anxiety expressions, children with a fearful temperament might show heightened fearful responses independent of parental warnings," notes Nimphy.

"We would expect children to become less sensitive to parental fear information as they grow older," says Nimphy. "Older children have learned to better regulate their emotions, and are influenced by more people, such as their social peers. However, this was not the case. This does not mean that age or social peers are irrelevant. We need more

studies that follow the same child in different ages and contexts."

Prevention strategies

"My personal take-home message would be a reminder of how powerful verbal communication by parents can be, even after a single exposure, Nimphy concludes. "And for anxious parents, prevention strategies could incorporate psychoeducation or training aimed at reducing the amount of repeated exposure to parental anxiety expressions."

The study also made clear that a lot more empirical research is needed and that some weaknesses should be overcome. "For instance, there is still an overrepresentation of mothers in experimental studies, and an overrepresentation of what we call WEIRD families: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. Whereas we know that family interactions and children's perception can differ across cultural backgrounds."

What makes children brave?

In the future, Nimphy wants to gain a better understanding of what kind of supportive statements or behaviors from parents can reduce child fear acquisition. "Future qualitative studies should assess children's perspective of what helped them in the past to face their fears and which statements from their parents they found encouraging. What made them brave?"

In 2022, Cosima Nimphy and a team of psychologists led by Evin Akar published an [empirical study](#) in the *Journal of Adolescence* showing that more parental threat information was related to stronger reported fear of COVID-19 in their [children](#). They also published a meta-analysis on the effect of—nonverbal—parental behavior on infants up to 2.5 years,

which proved to be small to moderate.

Aktar and Nimphy are currently working on one meta-analysis and two experimental studies, in which one parent behaves anxiously and one does not: "Can a confident response from the other parent reduce the effect?"

More information: Cosima Anna Nimphy et al, The Role of Parental Verbal Threat Information in Children's Fear Acquisition: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10567-024-00485-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-024-00485-4)

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