

Misreading faces tied to child social anxiety

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Children suffering from extreme social anxiety are trapped in a nightmare of misinterpreted facial expressions: They confuse angry faces with sad ones, a new Emory University study shows.

"If you misread [facial expressions](#), you're in social trouble, no matter what other social skills you have," says Emory psychologist Steve Nowicki, a clinical researcher who developed the tests used in the study. "It can make life very difficult, because other people's faces are like a prism through which we look at the world."

It's easy to assume that a socially anxious child would be especially sensitive to anger. "It turns out that they never learn to pick up on anger and often make the error of seeing it as [sadness](#)," Nowicki says. "It sets up a very problematic interaction."

Some socially anxious children long to interact with others, he says, and may try to comfort someone they think is sad, but who is actually angry. "They want to help, because they're good kids," Nowicki says. "I've seen these kids trying to make a friend, and keep trying, but they keep getting rebuffed and are never aware of the reason why."

The study was co-authored by Amy Walker, a former undergraduate student at Emory, now at Yeshiva University, and will be published in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology*.

It is unclear whether misreading the facial expression is linked to the cause of the anxiety, or merely contributing to it.

By identifying the patterns of errors in nonverbal communication, Nowicki hopes to create better diagnostic tools and interventions for those affected with a range of behavioral disorders.

For more than two decades, in association with Emory psychologist Marshall Duke, Nowicki has produced a groundbreaking body of work on how non-verbal communication impacts a child's development. They have found that in a range of children with behavioral disorders, including high-functioning autism, direct teaching can improve their non-verbal communication.

"When I first started this work, people asked me, why are you doing this? Everybody can recognize emotions in faces," Nowicki recalls. Nonverbal communication was not taken that seriously, and relegated to popular magazine articles like, "Seven ways to improve your body language."

In his clinical practice, however, Nowicki noticed that some children who had trouble socializing appeared to misinterpret nonverbal clues. He sought ways to measure the deficits and remediate them.

"My heart went out to these kids," he says. "I had the idea that nonverbal communication could be taught. It's a skill, not something mysterious."

Nowicki and Duke termed the coin "dyssemia," meaning the inability to process signs. They also developed the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA) to assess subtle cues to emotional expressions, including visual signals and tone and cadence of voice. DANVA is now widely used by researchers in studies of everything from emotionally disturbed children to the relationships between doctors and their patients.

Provided by Emory University

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