Childhood Anxiety: Context Of The First Observation

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A boy around six or seven years of age and accompanied by who I assume is his mother, she seems to be in her mid-twenties.

Observations

A child goes to the jungle gym ladder and his mother follows close behind, she says something to him. He turns to her, once she is standing directly behind him, he turns back to the ladder and climbs up. A child runs to catch up with another boy who is presumably his friend. Mother rushes around the jungle gym and positions herself next to the bottom of the slide. After the friend goes down the slide the boy sits on top and does not go down. Mother talks. The mother then holds the child’s arm while he goes down the slide. A few minutes later the mother and boy are by the monkey bars. The boy jumps onto the platform to reach the bars. While the boy is going across the bars the mother walks next to him. The last time I observed them, the boy gets on the swings and the mother pushes him on the swing.

Questions:

- Does the child’s anxiety inhibits the reaction to help from the mother, or does the mother's reactions cause the anxiety?
- If parents change this behavior will this help to reduce childhood anxiety?
- At what point in childhood anxiety would a change of parental behavior be to late to make a change in the child’s behavior?

Evidence

Childhood and adolescent anxiety disorders are very common and often chronic, those with anxiety often develop depression, conduct disorder or attention deficit disorder. It is not yet definite how much genetic transmission accounts toward childhood anxiety as most research does not look into this aspect, but there is evidence that genetics play a role in behavioral inhibitions such as anxiety. This means that children of parents with anxiety disorders are much more likely to also develop an anxiety disorder themselves (Murray, L., Creswell, C., & Cooper, P. J. 2009).

Recent research has found that lack of self-efficacy in children and increased social withdrawal can be exacerbated by parental control (Rubin, K. H., & Coplan, R. J. 2012).

Self-efficacy is one’s perceived ability to control themselves and their own lives, not allowing children to learn on their own will decrease their self-efficacy (Carey). The development of anxiety disorders in children can be brought on by over protection of a parent (Clarke, K., Cooper, P., & Creswell, C. 2013). Children born genetically more at risk for anxiety most likely have a parent who exhibits anxious behaviors correlated with overprotection,this may then elicit

and maintain the child's anxiety (Murray et al. 2009). Mothers with anxiety and neurotic personalities tend to be more likely to instill anxiety and shyness in their children through attitude and habit (Crozier, W. R., & Alden, L. E. 2005). This anxious personality can be learned through language as anxious parents make more catastrophizing comments than non-anxious parents to their children (Murray et al. 2009).

Research from Murray et al. (2009) has found that when mothers model fear, their 15 to 20-month-olds will avoid the fear-provoking objects. This shows that modeling is important for learned fears in children and parents play a large role in fear information transfer. According to Rubin et al. (2012) "toddlers who were the most inhibited across contexts were rated by their mothers as being of wary/shy temperament...these mothers were observed to display overly solicitous behaviors…(being) highly affectionate and shielding of them when it was neither appropriate nor sensitive to be this way". Some children are more fearful, parents may sense their child's uncertainty or low self-efficacy and react in an over-supportive way (Rubin et al. 2012). Children with reduced risk of developing an anxiety disorder tend to have parents who "are not overly protective and who encourage children to take on challenging experiences may help children develop an enhanced sense of control" (Zalta, A. K., & Chambless, D. L. 2010).

This evidence could explain what could be interpreted as both parent and child's anxiety in my observation. The child hesitating at the top of the slide, only going down when his mother was holding his hand. The mother walking right next to her son while he was on the monkey bars. The child hesitated to climb up the playscape until his mother was behind him, and the mother pushing her son on the swing instead of letting him swing on his own.

Translation

Anxiety is a genetic trait which can be passed down from parent to child. This means some children are at higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder, these children at greater risk tend to have parents who have anxiety. Anxious parents my become overprotective of their children, jumping in to help them with obstacles the child should be working to overcome on their own. Due to parents constantly interfering due to anxiety, the child will learn to become anxious as well. These anxious children will feel as though they are unable to perform tasks on their own and will therefore have a low-self efficacy. Both factors; the child's low self-efficacy and the parents overprotective relationship, will result in the child to be unable to make their own mistakes. Therefore not being able to learn from them. This kind of parenting can also cause negative aspects within the parent-child relationship. As the child grows older and wishes to do things on their own they may feel their parent is suffocating them. The child urging to do things on their own may also become frustrating and anxiety-producing for the parent. To avoid and decrease 'over parenting', parents and children should work together letting children do more things on their own, giving the child some freedoms they are both comfortable with.