

Insecure attachment and fear acquisition in middle childhood

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Abstract

Parents exert influence on the acquisition of fear in their children. Previous research demonstrates that one way in which parents affect childhood fear is through verbal transmission of threatening information. However, it is less clear why some children are more susceptible for verbal threat learning than others. Therefore, the current study aims at investigating the role of attachment in explaining fear acquisition in children, by studying the influence of verbal threat information for novel stimuli on both fear cognitions and avoidance behavior. For this purpose, 60 general population children (aged 10-13) first completed the Experience of Close Relationship Questionnaire – Revised Child version (ECR-RC), and the Fear Beliefs Questionnaire (FBQ) regarding two unknown animals. Next, mother was asked to give the child threatening information about one of these animals. After this, the child completed the FBQ and the Search for Additional Information Scale (SAIS) for both animals. Finally, children's behavioral avoidance of both animals was measured using a Touch Box Task: children were told it contained the actual animal and were asked to put their hand in the box to touch the animal. Results revealed that negative information provided by mother influenced fear beliefs and information seeking strategies about the animal. But more importantly, while attachment did not correlate with changes in these cognitive measures, more anxiously attached children were less inclined to put their hand in the box of the threatening animal. This supports the idea that attachment plays a role in fear acquisition through verbal learning.