



# The mediating role of parenting behaviors in the relationship between early and late adolescent levels of anxiety: Specificity and informant effects



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The role of parenting behavior is often highlighted in the development of anxiety in youth. However, previous reports are limited in terms of the specificity of relationships between different types of anxiety and parenting behaviors, informant effects on these relationships, and direction of effects.

**Methods:** This study investigates these questions using longitudinal data from 1350 Swedish adolescents and their parents. Adolescents' self-reports of six dimensions of anxiety and adolescents' and parents' reports of six dimensions of parenting behaviors were used in the analyses. Parallel multiple mediation models were employed to analyze specificity and informant effects within a reciprocal effects model.

**Results:** Overall, and irrespective of informant, this study found little support for a mediating role of parenting behaviors in the relationship between early and late adolescent levels of anxiety. Evidence for specificity within the parenting-anxiety relationship was scarce with specific mediating effects observed only for panic/agoraphobia and total anxiety through the parenting dimension of rejection.

**Conclusions:** The findings of this study concern the un-conditional mediating role of parenting. Parenting behaviors may be more influential among some adolescents, depending on individual differences in other factors related to the development and course of adolescent anxiety. Thus, further research on moderating factors of the influence of parenting on adolescent anxiety is warranted.

## 1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric disorders among children and adolescents with a worldwide point prevalence of 6–7% (Baxter, Scott, Vos, & Whiteford, 2013; Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). By early adulthood, 20–25% have met criteria for an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives with higher cumulative prevalence rates observed in females compared to males (Beesdo, Knappe, & Pine, 2009; Copeland, Angold, Shanahan, & Costello, 2014). The onset of specific anxiety disorders often parallels typical developmental fears and worries. From childhood to adolescence, increases in the prevalence of social anxiety, generalized anxiety, panic disorder and agoraphobia are commonly observed, whereas the rates of separation anxiety and specific phobias tend to decrease with age (Beesdo et al., 2009; Costello, Copeland, & Angold, 2011). Similarly, the prevalence of any anxiety

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increases from adolescence to early adulthood with higher cumulative prevalence rates in females compared to males (Copeland et al., 2014; Costello et al., 2011). This major life transition is a core incidence period for panic disorder, agoraphobia and generalized anxiety disorder whereas first onsets for social anxiety, specific phobias and separation anxiety rarely occur after adolescence (Beesdo, Pine, Lieb, & Wittchen, 2010; Copeland et al., 2014). Among multiple factors considered in the development of anxiety disorders including genetics, brain maturation processes, hormonal changes, temperament, and negative life experiences, the role of parenting behavior is often highlighted (Beesdo et al., 2009; Haller, Cohen Kadosh, Scerif, & Lau, 2015; Paus, Keshavan, & Giedd, 2008; Rapee, 2012). In the literature, the two broad dimensions of parental rejection and parental control are commonly regarded as the most relevant parenting characteristics in the etiology of childhood anxiety (Ballash, Leyfer, Buckley, & Woodruff-Borden, 2006; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007; Murray, Creswell, & Cooper, 2009; Waite, Whittington, & Creswell, 2014). Parental rejection involves hostility, withdrawal, negativity, disapproving and critical behavior as well as lack of warmth, acceptance and emotional support (Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). Parental control can be conceptualized as either behavioral or psychological in nature, with the former supporting children's competence and the latter more commonly adduced as contributing to the development of anxiety in youths. Inadequate behavioral control involves lax control, unpredictability and unclear and inconsistent rules and has traditionally been associated with externalizing disorders (Ollendick & Grills, 2016; Skinner et al., 2005). Psychological control refers to restrictive, excessively regulating and over-controlling behavior and lack of autonomy granting (Murray et al., 2009; Wei & Kendall, 2014). The hypothesized mechanisms linking parental rejection and control to anxiety are the negative effects of these parental behaviors on children's emotion regulation, safety perceptions and opportunities to explore the environment and learn to cope on their own which in turn diminish children's sense of mastery and lead to increased anxiety (Bogels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; McLeod et al., 2007; Ollendick & Grills, 2016). Parenting behaviors on the positive ends of the continuums of rejection, psychological and behavioral control, e.g., warmth, autonomy granting and firmness, are considered important contributors to healthy adolescent development with a positive impact on mental health (Steinberg, 2001).

Despite evidence of adolescence as a core onset period for several anxiety disorders and higher incidence rates among females than males, most studies on parenting behavior and anxiety have involved study samples of broad age ranges without consideration of the potentially differential impact and perception of parenting behavior depending on the age of the child (Ballash et al., 2006; Ollendick & Grills, 2016). Meta-analytic investigations of sex differences in the anxiety-parenting relationship have yielded inconsistent results with findings of no sex differences reported by McLeod et al. (2007) whereas van der Bruggen, Stams, and Bogels (2008) found that associations between anxiety and parental control were stronger in samples with an overrepresentation of girls.

In their systematic review on the relationship between anxiety and parenting behavior specifically among adolescents, Waite et al. (2014) found that the majority of included studies reported significant associations between anxiety and psychological control with small to medium effect sizes, whereas support for an association between anxiety and rejection was less consistent but of similar strength (Waite et al., 2014). Comparisons with reviews including broader age ranges indicated weaker associations between anxiety and control and stronger associations between anxiety and rejection when adolescents were analyzed separately. However, the included studies in Waite et al.'s review were limited in terms of the specificity of relationships between different types of anxiety and parenting behaviors and informant effects on these relationships. The majority of studies assessed general anxiety symptoms, frequently relied on a single informant on parenting, and investigated the broad constructs of control and rejection rather than sub-categories of parenting behaviors within these dimensions (Waite et al., 2014). Whereas control and rejection have been found to explain 6% and 4% of the variance in childhood anxiety, respectively, analyses of sub-dimensions within these constructs have shown a substantially broader range of explained variance, ranging from less than 1%–18% with the smallest effect observed for warmth and the largest for autonomy granting (McLeod et al., 2007). Likewise, a recent study of the relationships between parental care and control and mental disorders in adolescents found that the pattern of associations varied depending on whether anxiety disorders were considered separately or clustered and whether models included single or multiple parenting dimensions (Eun, Paksarian, He, & Merikangas, 2018). Thus, further understanding of the complex parenting–anxiety relationship may be facilitated by investigating specific anxiety disorders and sub-dimensions of parenting and the extent to which adolescent gender affects the patterns of associations.

A limitation in the literature is the dearth of data on the direction of effects—is the relationship between parenting and anxiety best described as parenting predicting adolescent anxiety (parent effect model), or adolescent anxiety eliciting parenting responses (child effect model), or is it reciprocal with adolescents and parents influencing each other's behavior (bidirectional effect model)? The paucity of data on this topic is often noted in reviews as it hampers further understanding of the parents' role in evidence-based interventions (Ballash et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2009; Ollendick & Grills, 2016; Waite et al., 2014; van der Bruggen et al., 2008; Wei & Kendall, 2014). Although there is no consensus regarding directionality, results from the few available longitudinal studies among adolescents show some evidence for small bidirectional effects in associations between parenting and anxiety (Nelemans, Hale, Branje, Hawk, & Meeus, 2014; Pinquart, 2017; van Eijck, Branje, Hale, & Meeus, 2012; Van Zalk & Kerr, 2011; Wijsbroek, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2011).

The present study examined the extent to which different parenting behaviors are mediators of the relationship between early and late adolescent levels of anxiety. Six dimensions of parenting, representing both positive and negative behavior along the continuums of behavioral and psychological control and rejection, were considered. First, we investigated a general mediating role by exploring the influence of all parenting behaviors simultaneously on the relationship between levels of anxiety in early and late adolescence. Second, we investigated the specificity of the parenting–anxiety relationship by analyzing the influence of adolescent-reported social anxiety, generalized anxiety, specific phobia, panic/agoraphobia, and separation anxiety in early adolescence on homotypic (i.e., same-type) anxiety at 3-year follow-up through each parenting dimension with statistical control for competing parenting behaviors. Third, we investigated if the mediating mechanisms of parenting changed as a function of informant by replacing adolescent-rated

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