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An experimental manipulation of maternal perfectionistic anxious rearing behaviors with anxious and non-anxious children



Jennifer H. Mitchell, Suzanne Broeren, Carol Newall, Jennifer L. Hudson*

Centre for Emotional Health, Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales 2109, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The anxious rearing model of perfectionism development proposes that children develop perfectionism in response to parental worry about their children being imperfect and parental behaviors such as overprotection from mistakes and focus on the negative consequences of mistakes. In the current study, perfectionistic rearing behaviors were experimentally manipulated during a copy task in clinically anxious children ($n = 42$) and non-anxious children ($n = 35$). Children were randomized to receive high or non-perfectionistic rearing behaviors from their parents during the copy task designed to elicit child perfectionistic behaviors. Results showed that self-reported self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) was significantly higher in the anxious group compared with the non-anxious group. All children showed an increase in observed SOP in response to high perfectionistic rearing behaviors. Despite this increase in SOP in the high perfectionistic rearing condition, it was children in the non-perfectionistic rearing condition that improved significantly in task accuracy performance. Non-anxious children declined in task-related striving for perfectionism when they experienced non-perfectionistic rearing behaviors from their parents. Anxious children, however, did not show a decline in task-related striving following non-perfectionistic rearing. Results support the perfectionistic rearing model and parental perfectionistic behaviors' impact on children's observed and self-reported SOP and task performance.

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 298508062.

E-mail address: jennie.hudson@mq.edu.au (J.L. Hudson).

Introduction

Perfectionism involves the pursuit of extremely high and personally demanding standards for performance that inform self-evaluation (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Riley, Lee, Cooper, Fairburn, & Shafran, 2007). The extant research has focused on the clinical associations of perfectionism with various types of adult psychopathology, including depression (e.g., Zuroff et al., 2000), eating disorders (e.g., Bardone-Cone et al., 2007), and personality disorders (e.g., McCown & Carlson, 2004). Several lines of evidence also indicate a relationship between increased perfectionism and higher levels of anxiety (Christensen, Danko, & Johnson, 1993; Deffenbacher, Zwemer, Whisman, Hill, & Sloan, 1986; Meyer, Miller, Metzger, & Borkovec, 1990) and specific relationships with particular anxiety disorders, including obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and social anxiety (Alden, Ryder, & Mellings, 2002; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002). The majority of data linking perfectionism to psychopathology are derived from adult populations. However, the few child and adolescent studies available have found similar relationships of perfectionism to maladjustment, including increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Cook & Kearney, 2009; Dekryger, 2005; Einstein, Lovibond, & Gaston, 2000; Hewitt et al., 2002; Nobel, 2007; Robins & Hinkley, 1989; Steiger, Leung, Puentes-Neuman, & Gotthel, 1992).

Given the clinical relevance of perfectionism, research has begun to explore factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of this trait. Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, and Macdonald (2002) reviewed research and theory on perfectionism development and proposed theoretical models that focus on the role of the family environment and, in particular, the impact of parental rearing behaviors. Flett and colleagues' anxious rearing model is based on the premise that anxious parents encourage perfectionism in their children by promoting "a focus on mistakes and the negative consequences of making mistakes" as well as displaying "parental worry about being imperfect" (p. 95). The focus on avoiding mistakes could manifest in behaviors such as overprotection from errors, reminders of risks of negative evaluation by others caused by making mistakes, and alerts to potential future mistakes that could affect their children's well-being, with the aim of avoiding potential future threats. Flett and colleagues' theory suggests that anxious parents who display high degrees of perfectionistic rearing behaviors lead to increased perfectionism in children.

To date, there is limited empirical research on the perfectionistic rearing model. Some studies have examined "anxious rearing" behaviors in samples of children with anxiety (e.g., Grüner, Muris, & Merckelbach, 1999; Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, & Hulsenbeck, 2000a; van Brakel, Muris, Bögels, & Thomassen, 2006; van Gastel, Legerstee, & Ferdinand, 2009). In these studies, anxious rearing refers to parental worry about their children's safety and possible danger as well as overprotective behaviors. Therefore, the concept of anxious rearing behaviors examined does not have the same focus on imperfection and making mistakes as the perfectionistic rearing behaviors listed by Flett and colleagues (2002). Nevertheless, research has shown that parental anxious rearing behaviors are positively correlated with child anxiety (Grüner et al., 1999; Muris et al., 2000a; Muris et al., 2000b; van Brakel et al., 2006). Van Gastel and colleagues (2009) further found that children with anxiety problems are more likely to have anxious parents and/or parents who display anxious and perfectionistic rearing behaviors. Given the high rates of anxiety disorders in child populations (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2004; Maughan, Brock, & Ladv, 1999), this rearing model is particularly relevant to anxious children because it may explain one potential pathway for the onset of anxiety disorders.

As noted, there is limited research on *perfectionistic* rearing behaviors, in contrast to *anxious* rearing behaviors. A recent qualitative study on how gifted high school students scoring high on perfectionism perceived their perfectionism as developing found little support for the anxious rearing model (Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2009). Furthermore, an indirect investigation of the perfectionistic rearing model in university students showed that socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP, the perception that others have perfectionistic motives for the self) was positively correlated with a measure of parental perfectionistic rearing, whereas other types of perfectionism such as self-oriented perfectionism (SOP, self-directed perfectionism) and other-oriented perfectionism (OOP, perfectionism directed toward others) were not related to rearing (Flett et al., 2002). Research exploring the links between

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