

# Perceived intra-familial relationships in families with and without an anxious family member



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## Introduction and objectives

According to research on parenting behaviors, parental overcontrol may play a particularly important role in children's anxiety disorders (McLeod et al., 2007). In accordance with this hypothesis, current models of anxiety emphasize the role of perceived control as determinant of anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Hence, when parents prevent their children from experiencing control in age-appropriate contexts, children may develop a cognitive style characterized by a lack of self-efficacy and this may in turn increase their vulnerability to threat and heighten their anxiety. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the differences in perceived family relationships between families with and without an anxious mother or child. Besides this, we analyzed whether the amount of agreement between family members (interinformant agreement) was different between families with and without an anxious family member.

*Perceived autonomy in children with vs. without AD and mothers with vs. without an AD child. Means (standard deviations) and values of univariate tests*

## Method

### Participants

The present study included data from:

- 88 children\* (23 with a current AD, 65 controls)
- 88 mothers (32 with a current AD, 56 controls)
- 51 fathers

\*children were aged between 13-23 years

### Measures

A structured interview was used to measure participants' anxiety status. Perceived family relationships were assessed according to a multiple informant approach where child, mother and father had to report about their perception of two types of family dimensions: 'emotional connectedness' and 'autonomy'.

## Results

No differences were found with respect to the intra-familial relationships of families with vs. without an anxious mother. By contrast, families with vs. without an anxious adolescent showed differences with respect to their perceptions of adolescent autonomy. Compared to non-anxious offspring, anxious offspring reported less 'autonomy' in relation to both parents. Mothers of anxious adolescents equally experienced this. However, regarding 'emotional connectedness', no significant differences were found between families with and without an anxious adolescent. The data on interinformant agreement revealed that family members' perceptions of family relationships was similar between families with and without an anxious family member, except for the amount of autonomy exerted by the father towards his child.

Perceived autonomy	AD children	Non AD children		Mothers of AD children	Mothers of non AD children	
	N = 23	N = 65	<i>F</i>	N = 23	N = 65	<i>F</i>
C → M	2.7 (3.6)	5.8 (2.8)	14.41***	2.9 (3.3)	6.2 (2.5)	16.40***
C → F	3.6 (2.9)	5.3 (2.7)	5.12*	3.1 (4.1)	6.4 (2.4)	13.81***

Abbreviations: C → M = child towards mother  
C → F = child towards father  
AD = anxiety disorder

## Discussion and conclusion

Although these results highlight the importance of perceived individual autonomy in the emergence of anxiety, the underlying mechanisms by which parenting processes might affect children's sensation of autonomy are still unclear. Moreover, as revealed by the agreement data, perceived paternal autonomy seems to be important for the feeling of stability and support within anxious families. Further research should examine the specific role of perceived autonomy and emotional connectedness in the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders.

## References:

- Chorpita, B. F. & Barlow, D. H. (1998). The development of anxiety: the role of control in the early environment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(1), 3-21.
- McLeod, B. D., Wood, J. J. & Weisz, J. R. (2007). Examining the association between parenting and childhood anxiety. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27, 155-172.