

## Parenting style and child anxiety

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### **Abstract**

*This study's main objective is to examine the relationship between parenting style of parents experienced when they were children (in this research called "original") and the parenting style they use in relation to their children (called "current"). Another objective is investigating the subscales of parenting style, such as "care", "overprotection", "involvement" and "empowerment" and how they relate to a number of specific forms of child anxiety.*

*The battery of tests was applied to a group of children aged between 8 and 11 years ( $n = 30$ ,  $M = 9.87$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ) who completed anxiety questionnaires and scales of evaluating the current parenting style perception. Their parents completed a questionnaire that highlights native parenting characteristics.*

*The results reveal the existence of statistically significant negative correlations between the child's separation anxiety and his mother involvement. Also, in terms of the original parenting, it showed that child separation anxiety is negatively correlated with the maternal care received from his mother, and the care received from the mother from both her parents.*

*There were highlighted also statistically significant correlations between child's social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and his father overprotection. Agoraphobia negatively correlated with "care", that relates to the original parenting style.*

**Keywords:** *parenting style, child's anxiety, overprotection, autonomy, care.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

From childhood to adolescence, parents play an important role in regulating child's emotions and behaviors, but also in the development of self-esteem and identity (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). The parenting style of the mother and father are formed over time due to their different perceptions about child education, starting with cultural differences. Also, the parenting style is based on a different process of socialization, specific to the gender nuances (Barber, 1996). Therefore, the same situation involving education of the child if the parents produce different reactions leading to the formation of different parenting styles. These statements refer to different perceptions of parents related to dangerous situations and harmful to the child (Belsky, Putnam & Crnic, 2006).

The first theory about parenting style was developed by Baumrind (2005), who identified three types: dictatorial, authoritarian and permissive. Authoritarian style allows the child to form an independent personality, his parents being supporters of his behavior, but at the same time maintaining firm in terms of standards (Baumrind, 1991). Both dictatorial parenting style and the permissive one constrain optimal child development.

Children and adolescents who have been brought up in a dictatorial style tend to have average results at school, underdeveloped social skills, low self-esteem and are prone to depression (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Children who come from an environment with permissive parenting are performing poorly in school, but sometimes show a high level of self-esteem and good social skills (Darling, 1999). Underlining the idea that parenting style influences child development, Parker, Tupling and Brown (1979) described two types of parenting, represented by care and overprotection/control.

The study's results that are based on this theory have shown that people suffering from neurotic disorders are blaming low parental care and protection, while chronic diseases (asthma) and certain behaviors and disorders of infancy (dependence on parents, separation anxiety) are related to an increased level of overprotection (Parker, Kiloh, & Hayword, 1987; Shilov, Parker, Hadzi - Pavlovic, Manicavasagar & Blaszczynski, 1991).

Regarding the influence of parenting styles on child development, not only the child's attributes and internal resources are determined by the parents, but also the ability of self-regulation and self-evaluation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Thomas, 1980).

The study by Grolnick and Ryan (1989) show that parental motivation and support have a result in higher academic performance, rather than passively or overprotectiveness. Baldwin (2007) found that parenting styles are associated with optimism, which translates into a high level of influence between the child's acceptance of the parenting style and his level of happiness and self-acceptance. Furthermore, a high level of control exercised by the mother, associated

with a low level of emotional involvement of the father leads to deficits in attention and behaviors like vandalism, violation of rules and threatening others (Gadeyne, Ghesquiere & Onghena, 2004). Also, the father's involvement during child development is extremely important; a good father-child relationship is associated with the lack of emotional and behavioral difficulties in adolescence and a greater level of academic motivation (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004).

Making a field studies review, we find the development of some research that seeks to support the hypothesis of the existing relationship between parenting style and socio-emotional development of children (Belsky, Putnam & Crnic, 1996; Betts, Gullone, Allen, 2010; Rubin, Cheah & Fox, 2001).

Karazsia and Wildman (2008) have attempted to highlight how parent's behavior is mediating the relationship between positive affects (PA) and negative affects (NA) and children's behavioral problems. The results on a number of 1461 subjects argue that both negative and positive affects are influenced in early and middle childhood by parental behaviors. Specifically, maladaptive behaviors of parents mediate the relationship between maternal affects and children's behavioral problems (Karazsia & Wildman, 2008).

In another study, Aunola and Nurmi (2005) tried to highlight the combination of parenting styles of mothers and fathers, which best predicts the type of behavioral problems - internal / external of children. These styles are: affection, controlling behavior and psychological control. The results showed that high levels of psychological control exercised by the mother (guilt, manipulation, threats of withdrawal of love), associated with increased levels of affection, leads to increased behavioral problems in children (i.e. drug use, early sexual behavior problems, specific problems to the period of adolescence) (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005).

On the other hand, behavioral control exercised by the mother (behavior monitoring, setting limits, demands on highlighting maturity) lowers behavioral problems of external type (anger and aggressive behavior) of the children, if associated with a low level of psychological control (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005).

In a series of research is argued that in addition to behavior problems, parenting style influences children's anxiety level (Ginsburg, Siqueland, Masia - Warner, Hedtke, 2004; Rapee, 1997; Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). For most children, however anxiety is a common experience, transient and functional, differing in shape and intensity, depending on the stage of development (Last, Perrin, Herseni, Kazdin, 1996), but sometimes the severity of these symptoms can reach levels similar to those of adult (Last, 1993 as cited in Last et al., 1996).

Research results have shown a strong relationship between child anxiety and overprotective parents. When parents exercise an exaggerate control over the child, reflected by critics, penalties, invasion of privacy, this child will grow anxious, with a low confidence level in

make decisions on his own (Parker, 1991). A dictatorial parenting style contributes to the development of a cognitive model in which the child believes that all results are determined by external factors (Block & Kremen, 1998). The child will experience the feeling of lack of control over any situation that involves him (Heimberg & Spokas, 2007). In a study made by Wood (2006) on a sample of 40 children, diagnosed with anxiety disorder, has shown that an intrusive parenting style, characterized by unnecessary assistance in daily tasks of the child and the invasion of privacy, causes separation anxiety in child development. Also, the dread of anxiety is associated with the parenting style (Erozkan, 2012). Therefore, the emotional warmth of parents was associated negatively with anxiety, and as the child feels more affection from his parent's part, the chances that he becomes anxious become smaller (Landis & Stone, 1952 as cited by Erozkan, 2012).

Based on these aspects, the present study seeks to investigate primarily the relationship between parenting style of parents experienced in their own childhood and the parenting style used in relation to their children. Secondly, it examines whether there is an association between parenting style and child's anxiety level.

## **II. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS**

This study has as primary objective to identify the relationship between the parenting style experienced by parents in their childhood (for which we will use in this study, the term "original") and the parenting style used in relationship with their children (here studied under the name of "current"). Original parenting style is defined by two sub-dimensions: "care" and "over-protection". Current parenting style is defined by overtones "involvement" and "autonomy".

Also, the second objective of the research is to identify an association between the original or current parenting style and the anxiety level of children.

The established general hypothesis is: There is an association between the original parenting style and the current parenting style in the investigated group.

The specific hypotheses are:

- There is a significant association between subscale "overprotection" of the original parenting construct and the subscale "autonomy" of the current parenting construct.
- There is a significant association between the autonomy granted by the parents and child anxiety.
- There is a significant association between the level of involvement of parents and the child's anxiety level.
- There is a significant correlation between the subscale "overprotection" of the original construct of parenting and child anxiety.

- There is a significant correlation between the subscale „care" of the original construct of parenting and child's anxiety.

## **2.1. Participants**

The study was conducted on a sample of 30 children and parents. Children aged between 8 and 11 years ( $M = 9.87$ ,  $SD = 1.137$ ). The sample includes a total of 14 girls and 16 boys. Maternal age is between 29 and 48 years ( $M = 38.33$ ;  $SD = 3.854$ ) and between 31 and 48 for the fathers ( $M = 39.77$ ,  $SD = 3.854$ ).

## **2.2. Instruments**

*Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI, Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979) measures how fundamental parenting styles are perceived by measuring the variable "care", "overprotection" / "control". The scale was applied to both parents of each child who participated in the research. Adults complete the test, using their recalled memory to identify how they perceived their parents in the first 16 years of life. Subjects have 4 possible answers, from "very likely" to "very unlikely". Following the interpretation of the results, parents can be included in one of these parenting styles "emotional coercion", "control based and deprived of affection", "optimal" or "negligent".

In the original study published by Parker, Tupling & Brown in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1979), they evaluated 150 students and nurses and 500 volunteers. PBI has proven to be valid, the results were confirmed in subsequent retesting, which followed in large periods of time. For this study, the internal calculated consistency of the scale was a good one and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each of the subscales are: for the subscale "care" as it relates to the mother, Cronbach's alpha 0.94, and 0.80 for the father. For subscale "overprotection" the mother had Cronbach's alpha value of 0.86 and 0.87 for the father.

*Spence Children's Anxiety Scale* (Spence, 1997) is a self-assessment tool for children. The scale is designed to identify the symptoms describing the separation anxiety, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorders, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety and the fear of physical harm. Most data come from applying the test on a sample of 2052 children aged 8 to 12 years, of which 851 boys and 1201 girls, students in the city of Brisbane, Australia (Spence, 1998). The scale contains 44 items, of which 38 reflect the specific symptoms of anxiety and 6 have positive connotations. Subjects are asked to circle the corresponding subscale of the frequency of experiencing each symptom, rated from 0 to 3, where 0 corresponds to answer "never" and 3 "always". The consistency of the scale was checked and the Cronbach's alpha was 0.93. The results for each subscale are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for the subscales of Spence Children's Anxiety Scale*

Subscale	Cronbach's alpha
Separation anxiety	0.81
Social fobia	0.83
Obsessive compulsive disorder	0.84
Agoraphobia	0.94
Fear of injury	0.93
Generalised anxiety	0.94

The perceptions of parent's scales (POPS, Grolnick, Ryan & So, 1997) consist of 22 items, 11 for mothers and 11 for fathers. The scale measures the children's perception of the degree of involvement of parents in their lives, but also on the level of autonomy that they provide. Each item presents four possible answers and the subject of chooses the one that best describes his reality. For this study, the internal consistency of the scale was Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.

#### *The procedure*

The battery of questionnaires was distributed to children in classes II, III and IV from several schools in Bucharest, in the classroom. Previously, about 90 students received a letter for them and their parents with a request to participate in a research on parenting style and child anxiety. The active consent was obtained from 70 families (54.4% of cases). The researcher also asked teachers and the school for permission to access the classroom and makes the investigation.

Each set of questionnaires was placed in an envelope, and parents were instructed to seal the envelope after completing forms. A deadline was set for returning responses and on an agreed time, the sealed batteries questionnaires were collected directly by the researcher. Questionnaires were completed in an anonymous way. Subsequently a code was used, written on each set in order to pair the responses from members of the family. Out of 70 sets of distributed questionnaires, 37 were returned, and 7 of them were filled only by a parent, whether the father or the mother. In the end, a total of 30 questionnaires were retained, answered by both parents and children.

### III. RESULTS

Correlation analysis was performed using Pearson coefficient calculation, following the establishment of the normal distribution of the recorded data.

The first hypothesis that there is an association between the original parenting style and the current parenting style was not supported by the data of this study. Therefore, the results showed that there isn't a significant statistical correlation between variables "maternal involvement" and "paternal involvement", which measures the current parenting style and the corresponding variables subscale "care", afferent to the original parenting style. It was also found that there are not significant statistical correlations between variables "mother granted autonomy" and "father granted autonomy" as showed by the POPS variables corresponding to PBI scales "overprotection" and "care", for each parent.

For verifying the the following assumptions, results showed that: separation anxiety scores for children correlate negatively, statistically significant with the mother's involvement ( $r = -0.39, p < 0.05$ ).

The scores for obsessive-compulsive disorder, correlated positively, statistically significant with the autonomy granted by the father ( $r = 0.415, p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 2).

Further verification results, obtained after verifying correlations supported by the fourth and fifth hypotheses are presented in Table. 3.

Thus it was found that the child's separation anxiety correlates negatively, statistically significantly with maternal care received from her mother ( $r = -0.41, p < 0.05$ ). The child's separation anxiety is negatively correlated with the mother received care from both her parents ( $r = -0.41, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 2. Pearson correlations between the current parenting style and anxiety.

	Mother's involvement	Father's involvement	Total involvement	Mother's autonomy	Father's autonomy	Total autonomy
Separation anxiety	-.39*	-0.18	-0.30	-0.03	-0.02	-0.03
Social fobia	0.12	-0.06	0.07	-0.05	-0.00	-0.03
OCD	0.01	0.25	0.13	-0.06	.42*	0.24
Agoraphobia	0.03	0.25	0.15	-0.15	0.30	0.11
Fear of injury	-0.25	-0.05	-0.16	-0.05	0.26	0.14
Generalised anxiety	-0.14	-0.08	-0.12	-0.19	0.02	-0.09
Anxiety total	-0.10	0.06	-0.02	-0.11	0.23	0.09

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ;  $n = 30$

Table 3. Pearson correlations between the original parenting style and anxiety

	Mother care	Father care	Mother care	Father Mother care	Father O Father C Care	Care Father O	OP M mother	OP M Father	OP M	OP F mother	OP F father	OP F
Separation anxiety	-.41*	-.29	-.41*	-.28	-.15	-.32	0.17	0.01	0.10	-0.01	-0.11	-0.09
Social fobia	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.18	-0.18	-0.19	-0.18	-0.21	0.03	-.38*	-0.26
OCD	-0.25	-0.10	-0.20	-0.16	-0.04	-0.14	0.20	0.05	0.14	0.03	-.39*	-0.27
Agoraphobia	-0.13	-0.31	-0.26	-0.29	-0.32	-.48**	0.15	0.08	0.13	0.10	-0.31	-0.16
Fear of injury	-0.32	0.01	-0.17	-0.01	-0.22	-0.20	0.19	-0.14	0.02	-0.13	-0.22	-0.23
Generalized anxiety	-0.30	-0.10	-0.22	-0.14	-0.16	-0.23	0.01	-0.12	-0.08	-0.16	-0.33	-0.33
Anxiety total	-0.29	-0.20	-0.28	-0.22	-0.22	-0.34	0.13	-0.03	0.05	-0.01	-.36*	-0.27

Note\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01: n=30

The child’s social phobia correlated negatively statistically significant with father overprotection, received from his father (r = -0.38, p <0.05).

The child’s obsessive-compulsive disorder correlated negatively statistically significant with father overprotection, received from his father (r = -0.39, p <0.05).

The child’s agoraphobia correlated negatively statistically significant, with the subscale father’s "care", associated to the original parenting style, respectively with the care received by the father in his childhood (r = -0.48, p <0.01).

Total child’s anxiety correlated negatively, statistically significant with the subscale "father overprotection" associated to the original parenting style (r = -0.36, p <0.05).

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS

In the present research, the assumption that an association can be established between the original and current parenting style was not confirmed.

Studies show that parenting style can be measured both by questionnaires, the choice made for this study and by observing interactions between parents and their children (IJzendoorn, 1992). A meta-analysis conducted on the basis of 30 studies on the transmission of parenting model, IJzendoorn (1992) concludes that "the most promising and conclusive results regarding the transmission of the parenting style were obtained in studies that used measurement methods based on observation and those that have used the Adult Attachment Inventory for operational current internal representation of experiences in childhood".



Testing hypotheses about original and current parenting styles and children anxiety reveals the existence of statistically significant correlations of subscales of the parenting styles, namely autonomy, care and involvement given to the child by his parents.

Regarding hypothesis 2 on the association between autonomy granted by parents and children anxiety, a positive statistically significant correlation between the autonomy granted by the father and the scores for obsessive-compulsive child, was achieved ( $r = 0.415$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Traditionally, the autonomy granted by parents was considered the reverse of parental control (Rapee, 1997), many studies focusing more on investigating control in its various aspects: psychological control, behavioral, overprotection (Balash et al., 2006, Gere et al., 2012; Woods, 2006) and less on specific investigation of autonomy.

McLeod, Wood, Weisz (2007) explicitly define autonomy granted by parents and establish that that low levels of granting autonomy are strongly correlated with high levels of child anxiety, therefore a negative correlation between the two variables.

Bögels, Verhoeven and Bruggen (2012) consider the autonomy granted by the parents a subdivision independent of the parenting style and from this perspective the results of this research support those of this study: there are positive correlations between maternal and paternal autonomy to children younger than 10 years.

Hypothesis 3 is only partially confirmed, marking a statistically significant negative correlation between maternal involvement and separation anxiety ( $r = -0.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Emotional warmth of parents was negatively associated with anxiety, in other words, as the child feels more affection from his parents, the chances for him to become anxious are smaller (Landis & Stone, 1952 as cited Erozkan, 2012). A mother who is careful and constant involved in her child's life will provide him premises to perceive the world as a place that you can conquer, being able to experience her knowledge without excessive fear of the unknown. The lack of maternal care and the association with the child's separation anxiety appear to be transmitted transgenerational issues, the variable "care" corresponding to the scale applied to mothers, significantly and negatively correlating with the child's separation anxiety in this study ( $r = -0.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (hypothesis 5).

It should be noted that in the studies that are based on the assumption that parental overprotection and lack of autonomy are associated with various forms of anxiety, the results are contradictory. Van Der Bruggen, Stams and Bögels (2008) conducted a meta-analysis on a group of 1300 parent-child dyads, analyzing the data of 23 studies and show that there is a close correlation between overprotection and child anxiety. On the other hand, Gere et al. (2012), in a re-research conducted on a sample of 190 children, suggests that there isn't a direct correlation between parental overprotection, and this being mediated by children's behaviors associated with anxiety.

Our research hypotheses assumed a connection between the parenting style experienced by parents in childhood, measured by the two subscales - "care" and "overprotection" and the symptoms experienced by the child - anxiety. Regis rated results showed that the care perceived by the mother and the overprotection perceived by the father correlated with certain forms of anxiety. Hypothesis 5, partially confirmed, referred to the results reflected by the scores of the care perceived by the mother in childhood that correlated statistically significant with those that reflect the child's separation anxiety ( $r = -0.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Corroborating confirmations for the assumptions 3 and 5 on the scale involvement / maternal care - separation anxiety from the perspective of the child and also the mother, provides an indirect evidence that, at least in terms of maternal manifested care, the parenting style is passed on from one generation to another.

Under normal circumstances, a mother who was emotionally secure and has internalized a positive relationship model with her own mother will transmit this relationship further, being attentive to the needs of her child and constantly satisfying them (Bowlby, 1988; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Hypothesis 4, partially confirmed, shows that there is a mild association between father's perceived overprotection and obsessive-compulsive symptoms ( $r = -0.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and child's social phobia ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Although the correlation between the autonomy granted by parents and anxiety is a positive one, the over protectiveness experienced by the father is negatively correlated with certain forms of child anxiety. Confirmation hypotheses 4 and 5 leave room for further discussion on how the parental vulnerabilities are transmitted to children, as shown in studies conducted by Caspi, Bern, & Eider (1989).

The main limitations of this study are related to the small number of participants, the lack of representativeness of the sample of Romania population, the non-experimental design of a correlational type and other methodological factors that are being discussed below.

Lack of representativeness of the sample was given by the fact that families who participated in the study belong to middle class, parents have higher education and have access to the best educational information.

This non-experimental design of a correlational type of this study allows us to underline a link between analyzed variables and to determine the intensity of this association, without giving us clues about the direction of the association in question. For this reason we cannot affirm, for example, that a negative parenting style causes the development of the child's anxiety or on the contrary, a child's anxious behavior causes a certain style of parenting.

Investigation of the parenting style on both parents and children required a selection of different work tools depending on the age of the subjects. Thus we chose PBI, applicable retrospectively on parents and POPS, an adapted tool for children and adolescents, both scales measuring how subjects perceive the manner in which they were or are educated. However the

use of tools that operationalize somewhat different the parenting style has led to difficulties in establishing statistically significant correlations and subsequently in identifying those elements that could be transmitted from one generation to another. The instruments used in this study were used in this research in a pilot study.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that both scales above are based on information supplied by the beneficiary that had his parenting style evaluated. This evaluation involves a degree of subjectivity which has not been corrected by another type of measurement, for example observation or by a third party.

It is considered that the questionnaires of measuring parenting style and interviews, underestimate the intensity of correlations between the parenting style and child anxiety, compared to observational measurements (McLeod et al., 2007).

Another methodological factor highlighted by McLeod et al. (2007) with an influence on the importance of the association between parenting style and child anxiety is the measurement method of child's anxiety. These authors found that the clinical samples, in which anxiety disorders have a clear diagnostic, generated stronger correlations than when children's anxiety was assessed on the basis of questionnaires in a non-clinical sample. Our study falls in the last mentioned category, this constituting itself into a possible explanation for the weak correlation between certain types of anxiety and the subscales of parenting style.

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