
FACTORS PREDICTING SOCIAL ANXIETY AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The current study was designed to explore the factors causing social anxiety among middle school children. A qualitative research design was used to answer the research questions of the present study. A sample of 30 mothers of middle school children was selected purposefully from different schools of Lahore Pakistan. Data were analyzed by conducting thematic analysis using an inductive technique. Results of thematic analysis generated four main themes including parental factors, school factors, family context, and child's characteristics accompanied by different subcategories. It was concluded that many underlying factors strengthen social anxiety among middle school children. All of these factors are associated with Parents, family, school, and child's characteristics that require special attention of professionals.

Keywords: social anxiety, family context, parent-child relationship, parenting, peer relationship

INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety is a condition characterized by "a distinct and obstinate fear of one or more social or performance situations involving exposure to unacquainted people or a possible inspection by others" (Hunt, 2019). Burstein, Kattan, Albano, Avenevoli, and Merikangas (2011) analyzed three aspects of social anxiety symptoms: i.e. fear of negative evaluation by others, escaping through new social situations, distress, and generalized social avoidance. Individuals with social anxiety also demonstrate specific physical symptoms including increase heart rate; nausea and sweating along with a fear that may create problems with individuals' quality of life (Beidel, Rao, Scharfstein, Wong, & Alfano, 2010). Social anxiety is common during adolescence, and the severity of symptoms can result in impairment of social, emotional, and academic performance (Koyuncu et al., 2015).

Many factors contribute to the social anxiety of middle school children. One factor contributing to the social anxiety of children is Parental over-control (Gulley, Oppenheimer, & Hankin, 2014). Parental over-control is excessive involvement of parents in a child's daily activities and motivation of extra reliance on parents (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2012). Xu, Ni, Ran, and Zhang (2017) found that higher levels of self-rated child social anxiety were related to higher ratings of paternal over control. Another risk factor that contributes to the development of social anxiety symptoms among children is the family environment as negative life events vary in different families. Frequent experiences of negative life events and parental anxiety are associated with childhood psychological problems (Grant et al., 2011). A third risk factor that contributes to the development of anxiety in children is a child's characteristics (e.g., temperament, child sex). Caouette and Guyer (2014) found an association between a child's temperament and social anxiety. Lopes and Albano (2013) reported that social anxiety in children is positively associated with the level of stress among children. McLean et al. (2011) found that social anxiety is more prevalent in the female population than the male population. In contrast, Farooq et al. (2017) did not find an association between the gender of children and social anxiety status. The age of children also plays a role in developing social anxiety. American Psychiatry Association, (2013) stated that the average age for the onset of social anxiety is 13 years, and 75% of individuals exhibit symptoms between 8 to 15 years.

Social anxiety is a very devastating psychiatric ailment. Though it is curable, many children stay unidentified and consequently remain untreated (Jin et al., 2014). Though there is a shortage of research in developing countries, the available sources deduced that social anxiety is higher. In Pakistan, there has been little research on children with a social anxiety disorder. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the socially anxious behavior of children concerning parental and family factors and child's characteristics.

Research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What factors contribute to the development of socially anxious behavior among children?
2. What is the role of the parent-child relationship and family in the development of socially anxious behavior of children?

3. Do the characteristics of children contribute to the development of socially anxious behaviour of children?

METHOD

A qualitative exploratory and descriptive research design was used to explore the variables of the present study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. The researcher contacted thirty mothers of children identified with social anxiety. Neither the child nor the parents had any diagnosed psychiatric illness. Sixty percent of participants in the study were boys. All children were enrolled in different private schools in Lahore. Interview with open-ended questions was used to collect the data for the present study. Data were collected in two phases, as follows:

Phase 1: researcher contacted school administrations and explained the purpose of the research. Schools, which had identified the students with social anxiety based on teachers' daily observations, were shortlisted and administration was requested to arrange a meeting with parents of children.

Phase 2: Parents of children with social anxiety were recruited to participate in the current study. After getting the consent form signed, parents were interviewed according to their convenience. Interviews were recorded with the permission of parents. Each interview session was completed in 40 minutes.

Data were analyzed by conducting thematic analysis using Braun & Clark's seven steps (Braun & Clark, 2006). First of all, the researcher transcribed the data after carefully listening to the interview recordings. The researcher read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize himself with the data. The next step was coding in which each code described the idea or feeling expressed in that part of the text. After that, the researcher highlighted various phrases in different colors corresponding to multiple codes. All the data were organized together into groups identified by codes. Then the researcher combined the multiple codes to generate themes. Themes were studied to find their relevance with research questions and revised. Finally, the researcher gave appropriate names to themes and narrated the results coherently with the help of relevant data.

RESULTS

During the interview, participants expressed the social anxiety experienced by their children. They reported that their children were reluctant in interacting with relatives, friends, and family members. They described their relationship with their children, their children's school performance, and certain family events that had a severe impact on the child's mind. They told problems faced by their children in school and family; and how they were trying to cope with their social anxiety. The following sections outline the main themes and subthemes emerging from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

PARENTAL FACTORS

PARENTAL OVER-CONTROL

Many participants reported that they had over-controlled their children due to the fear of being spoiled. Many of them did not allow their children to visit relatives or their friends. Some children were not allowed to make friends. Some mothers did not like their daughters to laugh or speak loudly. They did not even allow their children to give suggestions or to make decisions. Almost all mothers reported that they intruded on their child's activities. Some parents reported that they had a desire to make their children religious, which is why they had to over-control them.

Participant 1: I do not allow my child to visit relatives or friends, as I am afraid that somebody will spoil him.

Participant 22: when my daughter laughs or speaks loudly, I scold her and warn her not to do that again.

Participant 30: I do not allow my children to give suggestions regarding domestic matters.

LACK OF LOVE AND AFFECTION

Mothers described that they did not appreciate spending time with their children for discussing problems being faced by them in daily life. They also reported poor behavior from fathers that had made them afraid of fathers. These participants also described that their child liked to live alone and did not show love to the mother, which can be a result of a lack of positive association between parents and children.

Participant 3: I don't allow my child to discuss his personal and academic problems with me. He should deal with his problems by himself.

Participant 10: My child avoids coming in front of their father.

PARENTAL ANXIETY

During interviews, the researcher found most of the participants themselves were having social anxiety. Mothers reported that they did not like to participate in social activities. Few mothers were reluctant to interact with the unknown. Few of them told they did not like to participate but had to participate forcefully. Mothers also revealed feelings of dissatisfaction during the interview as they had unfulfilled desires.

Participant 20: I feel like everybody is staring at me and will make fun of me.

Participant 29: I don't participate in social gatherings as I hesitate to interact with other people

SCHOOL FACTORS

Almost all participants reported the average school performance of their children. The research found that inadequate response from peers contributes to social anxiety. Many participants described that their child did not have any friends and preferred to live alone. While others reported that, their children were starving for social approval. During the interview, it was also explored that most of the children with social anxiety had dejected feelings from teachers as not being involved in classroom activities and extra-curricular activities, which could be a reason for social anxiety.

Participant16: when my child tries to play with his friends, they avoid him and make fun of him.

Participant 08: My child complaints that her teacher pays more attention to other students and doesn't allow her to participate in classroom activities.

FAMILY CONTEXT

Participants described multiple factors, which had made their children quiet. According to mothers, certain illnesses of one of the parents, separation of parents, and the second marriage of father had obscured their children from participating in social activities. The job of mothers was another dilemma, which had forced mothers to remain away from their children. Few mothers described that frequent parental conflicts disturbed children a lot.

Participant 11: My husband beats me and shouts at me that has disturbed my child a lot.

Participant 18: My husband's second marriage has made my child reluctant in meeting with friends and relatives.

Participant 23: After my divorce, my child has become quiet and prefers to remain isolated

CHILD'S CHARACTERISTICS

In the present study, maximum data is based on male children, so it is difficult to predict the role of child sex in developing social anxiety. Mothers revealed that their children with social anxiety were also more vulnerable to stress. Shyness was another child characteristic reported by mothers that prevented them from participating in social activities.

Participant 24: I think my child remains quiet due to excessive stress in our family environment.

Participant 06: He is timid and does not get involved with others conveniently.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study suggest that parental over-control is a factor, which contributes to the social anxiety of children in middle childhood. The result of the present study is consistent with the results of Xu, Ni, Ran and Zhan (2017) who found a high level of social anxiety among children whose parents had high over-control over their children. The finding of the current study is not consistent with Akinsola and Udoka, (2013) who found a significant association of permissive parenting style with social anxiety of children.

The findings of this study highlighted a lack of love and affection between parents and children as a predictor of social anxiety among children. This finding is not consistent with the findings of Majdanzic et al (2014). They reported that challenging parenting behavior of the father improves social anxiety whereas, challenging behavior of the mother contributes to social anxiety. Moreover, increased love and affection of parents cannot improve the social anxiety of children. The differences in the results can be due to Majdanzic's research sample as his research was based on parents of 2-4 years old children. This suggests that the role of challenging parenting behavior may be different when compared with various age groups.

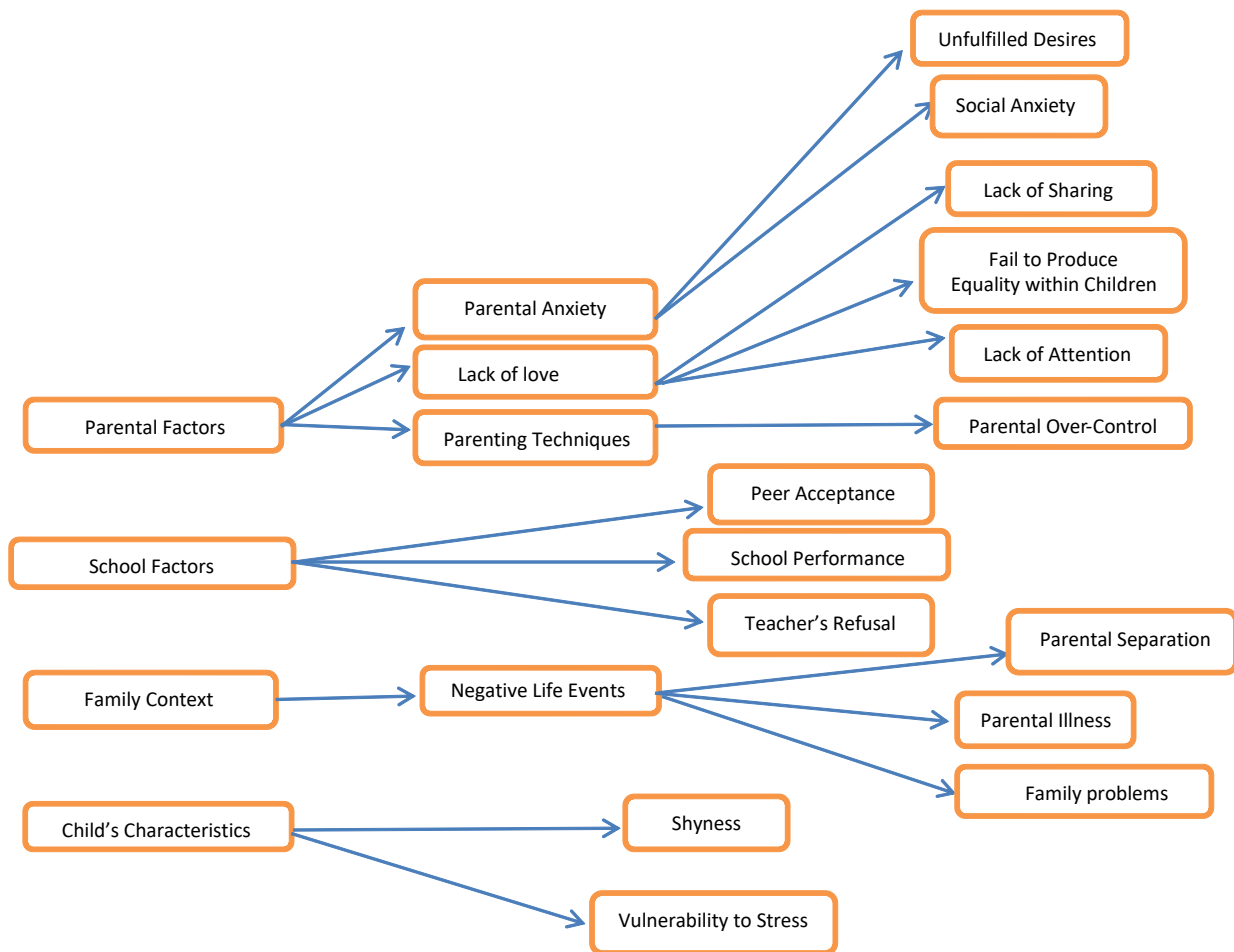


Figure 1: Themes generated from the data

Findings of the present study showed that poor peer behavior also contribute to social anxiety among children, and this result is consistent with the findings of Blote, Miers, Heyne and Estenberg (2015). The present study found teachers' refusal as a factor of social anxiety among children, which is consistent with the findings of Saltali and Durmusoglu (2013) who reported that the teacher-student relationship affects the social anxiety of children.

Findings of the present study suggest that negative events in the family contribute to social anxiety which is consistent with the results of Gómez-Ortiz, Romera, Jiménez-Castillejo, Ortega-Ruiz and García-López, (2019). Findings of the present study suggest that stress is a contributing factor to social anxiety, which is consistent with the findings of Lopes, and Albano (2013) who reported that social anxiety of children is positively associated with the level of stress among children. It is recommended that this study be conducted on a larger scale to draw more precise results.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that many underlying factors intensify social anxiety among middle school children. All of these factors are associated with parents, family, school, and child's characteristics that require the special attention of professionals.

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