Anxiety in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders is associated with affective symptoms in their mothers

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Anxiety is frequent in children with ASD.

Introduction

Anxiety is extremely common in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD; van Steensel, Bogels & Perrin, 2011) with up to 40% of individuals with ASD are reported to have at least one co-morbid anxiety symptom (van Steensel et al., 2011).

Affective disorders are also considered to be the most commonly observed psychiatric diagnosis in the first degree relatives of autistic individuals with reported rates ranging from 20 to 74% (Mazefsky, Conner, & Oswald, 2010).

Anxiety in children with ASD has been mainly considered in relation with repetitive behaviours and sensory processing problems. However, the association between the presence of anxiety in autistic individuals and affective disorders in parents has not been thoroughly examined.

Objectives

• To investigate the frequency of anxiety in children with ASD and their mothers.
• To investigate the association between anxiety in children with ASD with repetitive behaviours and sensory processing.
• To investigate the association between anxiety in children and adolescents with ASD and the presence of affective disorders in mothers.

Methods

48 parents and children participated. All children had a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder established by a multidisciplinary diagnostic team according to ICD10 and DSM-IV criteria. The mean age of children was 130.26 months (SD= 49.98).

Parents completed the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale (Spence, 1998) and Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS; Zigmond & Snaith, 1983).

Other potential correlates of children's anxiety were also examined. These included:
• chronological age (CA);
• autism severity measured by the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ; Rutter et al., 2003);
• repetitive behaviours measured by the Repetitive Behaviour Questionnaire 2 (RBQ-2; Leekam et al., 2007);
• sensory processing was assessed using Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999);
• developmental level assessed using expressive language items from the Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders (DISCO; Wing et al., 2002).

Results and Discussion

• 24 children with autism (50%) had anxiety scores above the suggested cut-off for elevated anxiety (Nauta, Scholing, Rapee, Abbott, Spence & Waters, 2004).
• 24 (50%) of mothers of children with ASD met criteria for clinically significant anxiety and 6 (12.5%) met criteria for depression.

Significant correlations between anxiety and children's and parents' variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RBQ-2 Rigidity/Routines/Preoccupation with Restricted Interests</td>
<td>.482**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Hypersensitivity</td>
<td>.695**</td>
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Parents’ variables

Parents' anxiety score | .424**

**p<.01

• Associations between anxiety, sensory hypersensitivity, and rigidity/routines/preoccupation with restricted interests in children with ASD previously found in the literature have been replicated.

• Anxiety was not significantly correlated with CA, Developmental Level, SCQ Total Score, RBQ-2 Sensory Motor Behaviours, Sensory Hyposensitivity and Sensory Seeking.

• Strong correlations found between anxiety in children with ASD and anxiety in their parents warrant future research before any strong claims that affective disorders share common genetic risk with ASD can be made.

REFERENCES


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