

The Effects of Anxiety on Temporal Attention for Emotive *and* Neutral Faces in Children

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OBJECTIVES: Cognitive theories suggest that the aetiology and maintenance of anxiety are associated with biases of attention for threatening information. However, findings relating to studies in child populations are inconsistent and the majority of such research has focused on spatial attentional biases. Consequently, the aim here was to investigate the effects of anxiety on *temporal* biases of attention for emotive stimuli in children.

METHODS: A total of 53 children, aged eight to eleven, were preselected for levels of trait anxiety to participate in an attentional blink task. On each trial, two target stimuli (i.e., a neutral face and either a happy or angry face) appeared in a stream of consecutively presented distracters (i.e., scrambled face stimuli). Participants were required to report which face(s) they had seen.

RESULTS: A mixed analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction between anxiety and trial type, such that high trait anxiety was associated with facilitated engagement towards angry, compared with happy and neutral, faces. In addition, high trait, relative to low trait, anxious participants displayed facilitated engagement towards neutral faces.

CONCLUSIONS: Findings offer support for cognitive theories, which purport that attentional bias for threat is an innate phenomenon and moderated according to anxiety level. The neutral face finding may further suggest that maladaptive assumptions/beliefs, particularly concerning ambiguous situations, play a role in the aetiology and/or maintenance of anxiety disorders. This research offers important clinical implications in relation to attention retraining that has been used to successfully attenuate such biases in anxious adults.