

Shyness and Psychosocial Maladjustment: Investigating the Moderating Role of Overprotective Parenting during Adolescence



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Abstract

This study evaluated the associations between shyness and psychosocial maladjustment (anxiety, depression, social problems), and overprotective parenting as a moderator. Past research indicates that overprotective parenting can exacerbate the psychosocial difficulties associated with shyness during *early childhood*. This is the first study to test whether overprotective parenting poses a similar risk for shy *adolescents*. 140 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.79$ years) participated and completed measures of shyness, psychosocial adjustment, and overprotective parenting. A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses revealed significant main effects for shyness when predicting anxiety, depression, and social problems ($ps < .05$). Two significant interaction effects were also found: (1) shyness-x-overprotective parenting when predicting social problems; and (2) overprotective parenting-x-sex when predicting anxiety. Simple slope analyses revealed that shyness and social problems were significantly related at high ($\beta = 0.27, p = .001$) and medium ($\beta = 0.33, p = .002$) levels of overprotective parenting, but not at low levels ($\beta = 0.13, p = .30$). Also, overprotective parenting was related to anxiety for girls ($\beta = 0.27, p = .001$), but not for boys ($\beta = -0.04, p = .65$). Findings suggest that overprotective parenting is negative for shy youth not only during childhood but also adolescence.

Background

- Research has shown that shy individuals are more likely to experience psychosocial difficulties because of their social fear and anxiety while interacting with others, as well as their tendency to internalize problems (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009).
- Previous research has shown that shyness is more strongly associated with psychosocial adjustment outcomes for youth whose parents are overprotective (e.g., Coplan & Arbeau, 2008).
- Overprotective parenting is believed to weaken the development of coping strategies in shy children (Rubin & Burgess, 2002), which in turn leads to increased difficulties.
- Unfortunately, most of the research done on shyness and overprotective parenting has been primarily focused on early childhood. As result, it is not known whether overprotective parenting is harmful to shy adolescents.

Hypotheses

1. Shyness will be related significantly to indices of psychosocial maladjustment (anxiety, depression, social problems) during early adolescence.
2. Overprotective parenting will moderate the associations between shyness and the outcomes, such that shyness will be most strongly related to adjustment difficulties for young adolescents with overprotective mothers.

Participants

140 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.79$ years) from the greater Buffalo NY community participated. 30% reported being in an ethnic minority group.

Measures

Overprotective parenting. Participants completed 4 items from a validated and reliable measure of overprotective parenting (Muris et al., 2003). Mean scores were calculated with higher scores indicating greater overprotection from mothers ($\alpha = .81$).

Anxiety and Depression. Participants completed the Youth Self-Report Measure (Achenback, 1991), a 112-item measure that assesses externalizing (aggressive, hyperactive, unrestrained) and internalized (depression, anxiety, over controlled) behavior. Of interest in this study were the anxiety ($\alpha = .70$), depression ($\alpha = .70$) and social problems ($\alpha = .66$) subscales.

Shyness. Participants completed the 21-item Shyness Measure (Cheek & Buss, 1981) that assesses shyness and sociability for different situations (e.g., 'I feel inhibited in social situations'). Participants were asked to answer on a 5 point scale (0 = not at all true to 4 = always true). Mean scores were calculated. ($\alpha = .74$)

Procedure

- Students completed questionnaires during school hours in their classroom for approximately one hour.

Data Analyses

- Hierarchical linear regression models tested the relation between shyness and the adjustment outcomes and whether overprotective parenting (by the mother) acted as a moderator.
- 3 regression models were run; anxiety, depression, and social problems served as the dependent variables.
- In all models, shyness and either anxiety, depression, or age were entered at Step 1.
- At Step 2, the sex and overprotection variables were entered.
- At Step 3, the two-way interactions involving over protection and shyness, overprotection and sex, and shyness and sex were entered.
- The final step considered the three-way interaction between overprotection, shyness and sex.

Results

Anxiety

- When predicting anxiety, significant main effects for depression ($\beta = 0.62, p = .001$), shyness ($\beta = 0.18, p = .007$) and overprotection ($\beta = 0.13, p = .033$) were revealed. Also, a significant overprotection-sex interaction was found ($\beta = 0.23, p = .010$).

- Probing of this interaction revealed that overprotective parenting was related to anxiety for girls ($\beta = 0.27, p = .001$), but not for boys ($\beta = -0.04, p = .65$).

Depression

- When predicting depression, significant main effects for anxiety ($\beta = 0.63, p = .001$) and shyness ($\beta = 0.14, p = .04$) were found.

Social Problems

- When predicting social problems, significant main effects for shyness ($\beta = 0.41, p = .001$) and sex ($\beta = 0.19, p = .01$) were revealed. There was also a significant shyness-x-overprotection interaction found ($\beta = 0.19, p = .01$).

- Probing of this interaction revealed that shyness and social problems were related at high ($\beta = 0.27, p = .001$) and medium ($\beta = 0.33, p = .002$) levels of overprotection, but not at low levels ($\beta = 0.13, p = .30$).

Conclusions & Future Directions

- Consistent with our hypothesis and previous research, the results indicated that shyness is a strong risk factor for psychological distress during early adolescence.
- Furthermore, evidence was revealed indicating that overprotective parenting does impact the adjustment of shy youth not only during childhood but also adolescence.
- Specifically, we found that overprotective parenting exacerbates the social problems associated with shyness, perhaps because overprotective parenting inhibits the social growth and skills of shy adolescents, which in turn causes social problems.
- It was surprising that overprotective parenting was related to anxiety for girls but not boys. We suspect that this gender difference may be due to overprotective mothers being more involved, in a negative way, in the lives of their daughters than their sons. But, additional research will be needed to test this hypothesis.
- Although this study reveals new evidence suggesting that overprotective mothers can increase the risks associated with shyness during early adolescence, future researchers should consider whether similar effects are found in middle and late adolescence.
- Future research should also focus on gender differences in overprotective styles (mothers vs. fathers) and how it might affect the adjustment of shy adolescents.

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