The bidirectional relation between parental controlling behavior and child anxiety
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Citation for published version (APA):
van der Bruggen, C. O. (2009). The bidirectional relation between parental controlling behavior and child anxiety Amsterdam: SCO-Kohnstamm Instituut

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Summary

Theoretical models of the etiology of anxiety disorders have emphasized the influence of parenting, especially parental control (e.g., Bögels & Brechmann-Toussaint, 2006; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). In this thesis, parental control was considered as the pressure parents put on their children to think, feel or behave in desired ways. The idea is that parental control may lead to an increase in the children’s perception of threat and to a reduction of children’s perceived control over threat. This pattern may enhance child anxiety by increasing children’s avoidance of challenging events, as children will develop fewer new skills to cope with these situations (Barlow, 2002; Rapee, 2001).

Researchers have discussed the transactional nature of parent-child interactions and the effects of child anxiety on parenting. Children do not passively undergo parental influences, but actively contribute to the interaction with their parents (e.g., Chess & Thomas, 1984). Anxious children may be harder to parent (Chess & Thomas, 1984). That is, these children may elicit more negative parenting due to difficulties comforting (Rubin & Mills, 1991). In anticipation of their children’s anxiety related distress, parents may feel the need to minimize children’s emotional expressions, and may have less confidence in their children’s autonomy. As a result parents may become more controlling (Hudson & Rapee, 2004; Rubin & Mills, 1991). However, in the long run, parental autonomy granting is thought to be a more adequate strategy helping children to cope with stressors (e.g., Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006).

In the current thesis, the main theme was the bidirectional relation between parental control and child anxiety. Five studies based on independent data collections were presented separately in the thesis. In most chapters the role of observed parental control during parent-child interactions was examined. The use of different types of research designs and methods to study this bidirectionality was explored. Moreover, two subthemes were discussed in relation to the main theme: (1) the role of parent anxiety and (2) the influence of parent gender.

Chapter 1 provided a theoretical background for the studies described in this thesis and an outline of the subsequent chapters. A first step before examining the
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bidirectionality was to provide a clear answer as to whether there is a substantial relation between child anxiety and parental controlling behavior. Chapter 2 described a meta-analytic review on the relations between child anxiety and observed parental control and parent anxiety and observed parental control. A medium-to-large association was found between observed parental control and child anxiety. No significant relation was found for the association between parent anxiety and parental control. Moderator analyses indicated that the relation between child anxiety and parental control did not differ with respect to parent gender.

Chapter 3 presented a cross-sectional study examining the relative contribution of self-reported child and parent trait anxiety on paternal and maternal controlling behavior. Non-clinical children, aged 7-12 years, completed two difficult Tangram puzzles, once with their father and once with their mother. It was a first attempt to provide insight in whether children’s actual anxiety behaviors guide parents’ controlling behavior. Results indicated that when children showed anxiety-related avoidant behaviors during parent-child interaction, parents were more controlling. In light of the role of parent anxiety, results indicated a curvilinear association between parent anxiety and parental control. That is, high parent anxiety was associated with both high and low levels of parental control. No clear role of parent gender in the relation between child anxiety and parental control was found.

Chapter 4 concerned a longitudinal study in which the mediating influences of observed parenting behaviors, related to the continuum of control (psychological control and autonomy granting) and support (rejection and emotional warmth), were examined. That is, mediators of the relation between perceived children’s negative emotionality at 3.5 years of age and depression and anxiety problems at 4.5 years. Negative emotionality -considered as the tendency to react to stressors with high degrees of emotionality- is indicated to be a precursor of child anxiety. Non-clinical children were observed during unstructured parent-child interactions, once with their father and once with their mother. The bidirectional relation between child anxiety and parental control was addressed by examining if children’s negative emotionality would predict later parental control. Findings indeed showed that high children’s negative emotionality resulted in more controlling behavior one year later in mothers. This
relation between children’s negative emotionality and parental control was not found for fathers.

Chapter 5 reported on an experimental study examining maternal controlling and autonomy granting behaviors as mediators of the relation between children’s anxiety and children’s approach behavior. Participants were spider anxious girls, aged 8-12 years, who conducted a spider exposure task in the presence of their mother. Moreover, the relations between mothers’ anxiety and their controlling and autonomy granting behaviors were studied. An attempt was made to clarify the bidirectionality of the relation between parental control and child anxiety by examining the influence of children’s anxiety during the exposure on mothers’ controlling and autonomy granting behaviors. In the reverse direction, it was studied whether mothers’ controlling and autonomy granting behaviors would influence children’s approach behavior of the spiders. Results indicated that during an anxiety-provoking situation, children’s anxiety did not appear to influence mothers’ controlling nor autonomy granting behaviors. However, mothers responded with less autonomy granting in response to their own anxiety. On the other direction, findings indicated that children’s approach behavior was not influenced by their mothers’ control nor autonomy granting, but by the children’s own anxiety and characteristic of the task (large or small spider).

Chapter 6 described differential effectiveness between fathers and mothers helping their children overcome anxiety disorders by means of Cognitive Behavioral Parent Training (CBPT). The father or mother of the children, aged 7-12 years, was randomly assigned to CBPT. Difference between father CBPT versus mother CBPT in reduction of child anxiety, parental control and autonomy granting, and parents’ own anxiety (6 weeks) after CBPT were investigated. Apart from teaching parents to act as lay cognitive-behavioral therapists for their children, another goal of the training was teaching parents to be less controlling, but to stimulate their children’s autonomy in order to help their children overcome severe anxiety. The issue of direction of the association between parental control and child anxiety was addressed by examining whether a parent training focused on changing parental control would help their children overcome anxiety disorders. Indeed, a decrease in clinical child anxiety symptoms occurred after parents had followed CBPT. With respect to the role of parent anxiety, for father CBPT, but not for mother CBPT, children’s anxiety reduced inasmuch as the reduction of parents’ own anxiety. Examining differences between father
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CBPT and mother CBPT, a trend was found in the direction that father CBPT was more effective in reducing child anxiety symptoms on the longer term.

In Chapter 7, the results of the Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were integrated and further discussed. Regarding the main theme, bidirectionality between parental control and child anxiety, it was concluded that results of this thesis were inconclusive concerning the effect of child anxiety on parental control, as well as concerning the reverse direction, the influence of parental control on child anxiety. This inconsistency in results might be explained by whether children and parents interacted during low or high anxiety-provoking situations. That is, it could be that during a situation that elicits strong anxiety, parents do not influence their children, and vice versa, because then parents and children are preoccupied with their own feelings with little attention or energy to react to one another (Eysenck, 1992).

In light of the influence of parent anxiety on parental control (subtheme 1), opposite to expectations, no evidence was found for a positive relation between parent anxiety and parental control. Possibly, this relation between parent anxiety and parental control is curvilinear. Specifically, parent anxiety can result not only in parental control but also in a lack of control or withdrawal (Woodruff-Borden, Morrow, Bourland, & Cambron, 2002). With respect to the role of parent gender (subtheme 2), father-mother differences in the relation between parental control and child anxiety were found in children who suffer from an anxiety disorder. Differences were in the direction that paternal control seems of more importance than maternal control in clinically anxious children. No clear father-mother differences in the relation between child anxiety and parental control were indicated for normal children. Moreover, Chapter 7 discussed the value of the different research designs used in this thesis. Clinical implications and ideas for future research were presented.