Worry in Childhood: A Developmental Perspective

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Age-related and developmental differences in the content and process of worry were examined in children 5 to 6, 8 to 9, and 11 to 12 years of age. These ages were chosen to approximate three levels of cognitive development. A measure of self-concept development was also included. Results suggest that worrisome thoughts occur in children’s anxious experiences across the age range studied. However, such thoughts were found to be more prevalent among children age 8 and older. Furthermore, children in the two older groups generated a significantly greater variety of worries than 5- to 6-year-olds. These older children were also significantly more able to elaborate the potentially negative consequences of selected worrisome possibilities. These findings suggest that the worry process may become increasingly complex in middle childhood. Results also supported the view that the content of children’s worries is constrained by social–cognitive limitations reflected by their age and level of self-concept development. Worries related to physical well-being decreased significantly, while concerns about behavioral competence, social evaluation and psychological well-being became more prevalent with increasing age and self-concept complexity. Implications for a definition of worry in childhood and its role in childhood anxiety are discussed.

KEY WORDS: worry; anxiety; cognition; child development.

1This article is based on a portion of a doctoral dissertation completed by the first author. Portions of this study were presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, April 1991. The helpful feedback of Thomas Borkovec, Karen Bierman, and Susan McHale is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are extended to all who helped in the study, especially the participants and their parents.

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Much of the anxiety experienced by adults is mediated by their active anticipation and elaboration of possible negative outcomes (i.e., worry) rather than the actual occurrence of external threats (Barlow, 1988; Borkovec, Shadick, & Hopkins, 1991; Mathews, 1990). Presumably, such anticipatory and interpretive cognitive activity also plays an important role in childhood anxiety (Kendall & Chansky, 1991; Kendall et al., 1992; Kendall & Ronan, 1990; Vasey, 1993). This view of anxiety fits well with current theories of emotional development that suggest cognitive factors and their development play an important role in children’s emotions (e.g., Case, Hayward, Lewis, & Hurst, 1988; Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1989). This perspective has important implications for the development of anxiety because, as children develop, their ability to anticipate possible negative events and elaborate their consequences improve dramatically (Vasey, 1993).

While excessive worry is characteristic of several anxiety disorders which occur in childhood, worry is common even among normal children. For example, Bell-Dolan, Last, and Strauss (1990) evaluated a sample of never-psychiatrically-ill children 5 to 18 years of age and found that over 30% endorsed symptoms of excessive worry or overconcern. Less severe levels of worry are even more common. Pintner and Lev (1940) and Orton (1982) found that over 70% of fifth and sixth graders reported 10 or more things about which they worry. Finally, Brown, O’Keefe, Sanders, and Baker (1986) asked children to describe thoughts that would occur to them in various stressful situations and found that catastrophizing thoughts were common in children ages 8 to 18 years.

Despite its common occurrence, little is known about the role of worry in normal childhood anxiety. From the perspective of developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti, 1984), the role of worry in childhood anxiety disorders can only be understood in the context of normal development. One of the main obstacles to understanding its normal development has been the failure of most previous studies to adopt a clear definition of worry. Therefore, the first step in the present study was to adopt a heuristic definition.

We assume that the defining features of worry in childhood are largely consistent with those described for adults (cf. Borkovec et al., 1991; Mathews, 1990). While caution is necessary when applying adult-based models to children, they can provide a useful context for initial research efforts. Worry was defined as primarily an anticipatory cognitive process involving repetitive thoughts related to possible threatening outcomes and their potential consequences. The worrier elaborates an event’s potential negative consequences and exaggerates the likelihood and magnitude of such possibilities (Beck & Emery, 1985; MacLeod, Williams, & Bekerian, 1991; Vasey & Borkovec, 1992). Based on this definition, the present study...