

From the University of Mississippi Medical Center Division of Public Affairs

## UMMC STUDY IN CHILDREN CONSIDERS HOW TEMPERAMENT CAN INFLUENCE ANXIETY DISORDERS

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JACKSON, Miss. – Medical Center researchers are exploring how children’s thinking styles, in particular the tendency to interpret situations as threatening, are influenced by their parents as well as their own temperaments.

Dr. Andres G. Viana, a child clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry at UMMC, is studying how this negative interpretation style in children can contribute to development of anxiety disorders.

According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, 32 percent of children under 18 will have at least one type of anxiety disorder before becoming adults. Anxiety disorders encompass problems such as separation anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia, panic disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Part of Viana’s Childhood Temperament, Thoughts and Emotions Study seeks to understand the interplay between children’s inhibited temperament – the tendency of some children to withdraw and react cautiously in new situations – and parents’ own thinking style in determining whether a child will likely perceive a threat in situations deemed safe.

Behaviorally inhibited children are at higher risk for anxiety disorders, researchers have found. They also found parental messages and cues influence how children think and interpret the world around them.

Viana said the tendency to make biased interpretations and perceive safe situations as threatening can also contribute to excessive anxiety and anxiety disorders. Knowing how this negative thinking style develops may help prevent childhood anxiety disorders from emerging in the first place.

“A child who scores high on measures of interpretation biases may think that a friend not saying hello in school means their friendship has taken a turn for the worse, rather than think that the friend was simply distracted and did not see him,” he said.

“We’re really looking at how children interpret the world around them, and what child and parental factors may influence these interpretations.”

Viana and his team are now recruiting up to 80 children ages 8 to 12 for the study. He plans to conduct diagnostic interviews with the volunteers, administer behavioral tests and computer exams. These tasks will show Viana’s team the extent to which children interpret events negatively, the role parents may play in this, and how temperament influences each child’s interpretation of the given situation.

“We typically see an increase in anxiety levels at this age,” Viana explained. “Children in this age range face social demands they weren’t facing before, including an increase in peer pressure and changing social circumstances at school.”

Children with behaviorally inhibited temperaments – already at risk for anxiety disorders – and parents who also train them to perceive safe situations as threatening, may be more at risk for anxiety disorders.

"Childhood anxiety disorders significantly impair children's functioning in school, at home, and in social situations," said Viana, "so knowing what child and parental factors may contribute to their development can lead to better prevention and treatment of these highly prevalent disorders."

For more information, Viana can be reached at [childanxietylab@umc.edu](mailto:childanxietylab@umc.edu) or at (601) 984-6657.

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