TEACHER RESPONSES TO ANXIETY IN CHILDREN QUESTIONNAIRE (TRAC): PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES AND RELATIONS WITH TEACHING STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

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Anxiety in children is associated with poor academic performance, reduced classroom participation, and absenteeism. There is increasing recognition of the importance of teachers in the identification and support of children with anxiety, although parents are understandably the focus of the bulk of research. However, no studies have been found that have examined teacher responses to symptoms of anxiety disorders in children.

In this paper the findings of a recent study (2013) will be presented, the aim of which was to develop and evaluate a self-report measure of the responses of teaching staff to displays of anxious behaviour given the possible role these responses may play in maintaining or reducing child anxiety.

Participants in this study consisted of 74 teaching staff employed in mainstream primary schools in Central and Greater London. The author created a self-report questionnaire, 'The Teacher Response to Anxiety in Children' (TRAC), which was administered through an on-line survey. TRAC consists of nine hypothetical scenarios of children displaying typical behaviours of three common types of anxiety: separation, generalised and social anxiety. Responses were reduced to two categories: autonomy promoting responses and anxiety promoting responses. These two categories derived from the literature were comprised of three subscales each: encouragement to face feared situations, rewarding bravery and independence, and problem solving (autonomy promoting responses); overprotection, sanction and avoidance reinforcement (anxiety promoting responses). Results revealed that TRAC has high internal reliability and validity. Analysis of the structure of TRAC suggested that there may be three factors: i) encouragement and problem solving responses, ii) anxiety promoting responses (over protective, sanction and avoidance reinforcement), and iii) reward for bravery and independence responses. Interestingly, there were significant differences in anxiety promoting responses between genders. There were also significant differences in avoidance reinforcement responses between new and experienced teaching staff. In addition, there were significant differences between the use of overprotective responses between teaching assistants and other teaching staff. Findings indicated that teaching staff did not differ significantly in the use of anxiety promoting responses between the three anxiety types: separation, generalised and social anxiety. Surprisingly, significantly more autonomy promoting responses were used for social and generalised anxiety than for separation anxiety. This study has real implications for the education and training of teaching staff and their influence in the development and maintenance of anxiety in children or alternatively, how teacher responses may reduce anxiety to promote bravery and independence.