

Physiological Functioning of Children with Anxiety: A Literature Review

My passion for scientific research emerged when I joined the ambitious and enthusiastic Development and Psychopathology research team led by Dr. Cynthia Suveg. Initially, I was assigned the tasks of the typical undergraduate psychology research assistant: scoring self-report measures, entering data, and scheduling participants, among others. These tasks, along with our weekly lab discussions, were the groundwork for the development of my own research questions and the essential preparation for beginning the year-long mission to complete a novel thesis which would advance the field of developmental psychopathology.

While reading the literature on childhood anxiety (the main focus of the lab) primarily from PsychInfo, I noticed that very few studies have examined the physiological functioning of children with anxiety disorders. Furthermore, studies which emerged on this topic often yielded contradictory results. There was not one literature review which presented the extant literature on the physiological mechanisms of anxious youth, but one was necessary to advance the theoretical models of childhood anxiety and to inform multi-method approaches to the treatment of anxiety. With numerous books borrowed from the University of Georgia Science Library, my laptop glowingly displaying the EBSCOhost database, and my APA manual by my side, I undertook my most challenging and most rewarding research activity of my undergraduate career.

I recall my first trip to the Science Library, walking through the double doors and making my way to the third floor. I remember feeling overwhelmed and exhilarated by the cornucopia of journals and books stretching far into the distance, lining the countless shelves that reached the ceiling. It appeared as an impassable labyrinth until I learned to use the GIL catalog to precisely find the literature that I was searching. I traveled to the library because I could not find a specific chapter of a book after initially searching EBSCOhost (including

databases such as ERIC, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PsychARTICLES, and the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection). The databases indicated that the book was available in print, just minutes away from the lab! I located the book and found within it even more relevant information to my research question (and other chapters that were not relevant). Nearby, I noticed books and peer-reviewed journals of similar content, and reading through them because of sheer curiosity, I left hours later than I had planned.

Returning home with several books in hand, I consulted EBSCOhost again. I started with broad search terms such as “anxiety,” “children,” and “physiology,” but this broad search produced over 2,000 articles, many which were irrelevant to my topic. I narrowed my question to examine heart rate and respiratory sinus arrhythmia, two very specific measures of physiological functioning. Furthermore, I wanted to find high-quality research published recently, so I examined articles published in peer-reviewed journals after the year 1980. Throughout this process, I also searched for the names of specific specialists in the field, examined the reference pages of all studies for other pertinent sources, and searched by title or within the abstract of articles. I found groundbreaking studies which took me on many different paths. For example, when reading about respiratory sinus arrhythmia, I encountered countless theories of emotion; theories of emotion led to research on emotion regulation; and emotion regulation to the physiological regulation of anxiety.

This ceaseless continuation of research linking one idea to the next, constantly evolving theories, and the building of a hypothesis opened my eyes to the mechanism of creating knowledge through the scientific method. It was then that I realized the beauty of this process and how important research is in driving human progress.

Finally, to ensure that I have surpassed all that is required to thoroughly explain the physiological functioning of anxious youth, I consulted psychology librarian Sandra Riggs.

Her expertise of the psychology research process proved indispensable. She demonstrated other databases that I had not yet utilized and explained how to order books which were not available at the University of Georgia libraries. Furthermore, she informed me about software designed specifically to build reference pages, such as EndNote and RefWorks. I incorporated her recommendations to find the final articles which I needed, ordered several articles which were unavailable, and synthesized the studies that I utilized using the references software.

I achieved my primary goal of writing an in-depth literature review on the physiological functioning of children with anxiety. Additionally, this research process helped me greatly in my development as a researcher and it prepared me for the rigors of graduate school. I discovered that scientific research is my forte and I plan to continue my research pursuits in the ultimate goal of expanding our knowledge of human psychology.

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