How does social anxiety affect young children?

What is this research about?
A young child with anxiety symptoms may be at risk of experiencing anxiety in their adolescence and adulthood. This is the case even for children who aren’t diagnosed as anxious, but who still have relatively high anxiety (called subclinical anxiety). Most studies of subclinical social anxiety have focused on older children and adolescents. This study examines the effects of subclinical social anxiety on early elementary school children.

What did the researchers do?
Researchers from Ontario administered surveys to 178 children in grade 2. The children were aged 7-8, and enrolled in public school in Ottawa. The children were interviewed twice, answering questions about how they interact with their peers. The children’s mothers also completed surveys about their children and about their own personalities. Additionally, teachers answered questions from a survey about the children’s social and academic behaviour.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found three negative impacts of subclinical social anxiety among young children:

- **Feeling lonely** Socially anxious children are less happy with their friendships and have a harder time making friends.
- **Problems at school** Socially anxious children dislike and avoid school more often. Teachers also rated socially anxious children as less academically skilled.
- **Developing negative coping styles** This includes worry and self-blame, which can aggravate already-existing feelings of social anxiety. This can make these children more at risk of developing anxiety later on.

Further, teachers are somewhat aware of the anxiety symptoms of their students. However, many teachers didn’t rate socially anxious children as being more anxious. This means

What you need to know:
Social anxiety can have negative effects on young children, even if the anxiety is not clinically diagnosed. The negative impacts include feeling lonely, not enjoying school, and developing negative coping strategies.
that a teacher may be less able to help socially anxious children because they do not know who is in need.

**How can you use this research?**

This research highlights the negative effects of subclinical social anxiety in young children. This study may interest teachers and school administrators, who may want to focus on helping teachers identify social anxiety in the classroom.

Future studies may focus on determining the direction of causality – that is, whether social anxiety causes loneliness and other problems, or the other way around. This study is also the first step in creating validated tests for measuring social anxiety in young children, and future researchers may continue to validate these tests.

**Potential Limitations?**

This study was based on children’s self-reports of social anxiety, which may explain why teachers didn’t detect social anxiety very well. Future research may consider using additional sources of assessment, like peer ratings or naturalistic observations.

**About the researchers**

Murray Weeks is a Researcher in the Department of Epidemiology and Community Medicine at the University of Ottawa, in Ottawa, ON.

Robert J. Coplan is a Professor with the Department of Psychology at Carleton University, Ottawa, ON.

Adam Kingsbury is a graduate student at the University of Ottawa, in Ottawa, ON. mweeks@connect.carleton.ca

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This Research Snapshot is based on an article that has been critically appraised for quality and susceptibility to bias.

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