

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Relationship between Parental Emotional Styles and Family Values to Anxiety Level among Primary School Children

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Childhood anxiety is one of the common mental health problems in children. Untreated childhood anxiety will lead to a higher risk of developing mental health problems in adulthood. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between parental emotional styles and family values to anxiety level among primary school children. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted in a selected primary school in Kelantan, Malaysia. A set of questionnaires consisted of the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale–Parents' Report (RCADS-P 25), the Parental Emotional Style Questionnaire (PESQ), and the Asian Family Characteristics Scale (AFCS) was used for assessing anxiety, parental emotional styles, and family values, respectively. Data were collected via an online survey using Google Form, and were analysed using Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) to determine the factors associated with childhood anxiety. The significance value was set at  $p < 0.05$ . **Results:** A total of 150 parents of primary school children from the selected school was involved in this study. The majority of respondents were females (82.0%), married (94.7%), hold a degree (66.7%), and were working in the government sector (60.0%). Most of the respondents' child were twelve years old (20.7%) and males (62%). Based on the MLR, emotional dismissing parental style ( $p = 0.025$ ) and family values ( $p = 0.016$ ) were significantly associated with anxiety in these children. **Conclusion:** Emotional dismissing parental style and family values were significant predictors of anxiety in primary school children. Future intervention research on childhood anxiety is needed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one of the most common internalising mental health problems in children. The prevalence of mental health problems in Malaysian children is increasing up to 20% (1). The 2017 National Health Morbidity Survey (NHMS) reported anxiety as being the most common mental health problem in Malaysian adolescents, with 39.7% prevalence (2). This percentage is worrying because a previous study has shown that adulthood mental health disorders can begin to emerge during childhood and adolescence (3).

Childhood anxiety symptoms are associated with poor emotion management skills, whereby children could

find it difficult to manage negative emotions, such as worry, sadness, dan anger, particularly when they are experiencing these emotions at a high intensity (4). Parents play a vital role in reducing childhood anxiety symptoms by helping their children manage these emotions. A recent local study showed that parental factors were significantly associated with mental health problems in children (5). Parenting styles were found to influence the development of mental health problems (5), including anxiety (6).

There are two main categories of theories related to parenting, namely Behavioural Change Theory and Attachment Theory. The behavioural change theory stresses on modifying parenting behaviours that can lead to a better behavioural change in children. Conventionally, parenting styles can be categorised into three main types: i) authoritarian; ii) authoritative; and iii) permissive (7). Further research found another parenting style, which is neglectful parenting (8). These

types of parenting are classified based on the levels of two main components, namely demandingness and responsiveness. For example, authoritarian parents would show high demands, but low response to their children's needs. A study revealed that authoritarian parenting was significantly associated with internalising symptoms in children (9).

On the other hand, the attachment theory refers to an emotional bond between people, for example, the relationship, or bond between parents and children (10). Based on the attachment theory, parent-child attachment can be categorised into four main types: i) secure-autonomous attachment pattern; ii) insecure avoidant-dismissive attachment patterns; iii) insecure ambivalent-preoccupied attachment pattern; and iv) insecure disordered attachment patterns. The best parent-child attachment pattern is the secure-autonomous pattern, whereby both parents and children can easily approach and interact with one another, especially when children are experiencing negative emotions.

Attachment-based parenting is also known as emotion-based parenting, which mainly emphasises on modifying children's behavioural, or emotional health problems by managing parents' and children's emotions. In line with this, parental emotional style was introduced by Gottman (11), known as emotion coaching. Interestingly, there are five main phases to raise emotionally intelligent child. First, parents need to be aware of a child's emotions. Second, a child's emotion is viewed as a chance for intimacy and teaching. Third, parents need to validate the child's emotion. Fourth, parents should assist the child in labelling the emotion verbally by using correct emotion words, and lastly, help the child to solve the problem, if needed. This approach was reportedly effective in preventing emotional problems in children (12).

On the other hand, emotion dismissing parenting style refers to parents who are unaware of their children's emotions, view their children's negative emotions as toxic, disapprove of their children's emotions, and avoid their children from negative emotions (13). Emotion dismissing parents treat children's emotions as insignificant, thus, they ignore children's emotions and want negative emotions to disappear immediately. Therefore, children of dismissing parents learn that their emotions are incorrect, unsuitable, or invalid. These children may develop poor emotion regulation skills.

Apart from parenting styles, other family factors can also play crucial roles in preventing mental health problems in children. Family values can be determined based on the levels of five main components: i) togetherness and harmony; ii) expression; iii) relationship; iv) conflict and centric; and v) religiosity and traditional practice (14). A recent study showed that connectedness to caregivers was significantly associated with a child's happiness (15). Another study revealed that depressive symptoms

were lesser among those with good family cohesion compared to those with poor family cohesion, and the reduction of depressive symptoms was significantly associated with better family relationship (16). Thus, enhancing parent-child relationship could lead to mental health recovery among children (15). Meanwhile, severe family dysfunction was found to be a significant risk factor of anxiety in children (17).

In terms of religiosity, a local study reported that religious activities were one of the significant associated factors of anxiety (18). Another local study reported that the lack of religious activities among respondents and family members has significantly contributed to the development of mental health problems (5). The application of religious activities by a family is very crucial to be a good individual (14).

However, changes in lifestyle have led some parents to spend less quality time with their children and adopt the insecure parent-child attachment pattern. Attachments to parents can affect children's emotional development, whereby more securely attached children would be able to regulate their emotions and use social support coping strategies more often (19). However, insecure attachment was associated with the development of internalizing problems, such as anxiety (20).

Consequently, untreated anxiety in children could lead to the development of mental health problems later in life, either during childhood (21), or adulthood (22). Previous studies showed that childhood anxiety was significantly associated with other mental health problems (21), for example, major depressive disorder in adults (22). Several studies also found that anxiety in children and adolescents was significantly related to suicidal ideation (23, 24) and suicide attempts (25). The latest NHMS reported that the prevalence of suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts among Malaysian adolescents was 10.0%, 7.3%, and 6.9%, respectively (26). Interestingly, a study proved that the reduction of childhood anxiety can be a long-term protection against suicidality (27).

To date, numerous studies have investigated the associations between emotion-based parenting styles and family values with anxiety in primary school children. However, most of these studies were conducted using a non-Asian family scale. Therefore, this study sought to identify the relationships between these crucial components (emotion-based parenting styles and family values) and childhood anxiety. This study aimed to provide new insights into these important family factors and their relationships with anxiety in children. The findings of this study could also be useful reference for future studies in developing intervention programmes to prevent childhood anxiety, with the involvement of parents.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study design and data collection

An analytical cross-sectional online survey was conducted between 3rd and 18th June 2021. The sample size of this study was calculated using a two-proportion formula. Sample size was estimated based on proportion of adolescents who had anxiety, 39.7% (2) and the proportion of children expected to have anxiety, 15%, value on normal distribution,  $\alpha$ , equal to 0.05 with power equal to 80%. After adjustment for 50% of non-response rate and design effect, the final estimated sample size as 148. Data were collected via Google Forms using universal sampling, whereby parents who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in this study. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Research Management and Innovation Centre, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. Permission to conduct this study at the selected primary school was obtained from the head master prior to data collection. The link to the Google Form was distributed to the parents through Whatsapp groups of parents of Standard One to Six students. Parents of primary school children in this selected school in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, and who agreed to participate were recruited. The exclusion criteria in this study were non-citizen. This primary school was selected because of its status as a religious school and its locality, which is in the urban area of Kota Bharu, Kelantan. A previous local study has shown the link between religious activities among family members and mental health problems (5), while the 2017 NHMS reported the prevalence of anxiety as the highest in urban schools (2).

### Study instruments

A set of questionnaires was used in this study, which included the pre-tested and validated Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale-Parents' Report (RCADS-P 25) (28), the Parental Emotional Style Questionnaire (PESQ), and the Asian Family Characteristics Scale (AFCS) to assess anxiety, parental emotional styles, and family values, respectively. The RCADS-P was used because of its acceptable validity at both clinical and community settings (28). A total of 15 items from the RCADS-P were included in this questionnaire to measure anxiety, namely items number 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, and 25. The remaining 10 items in the RCADS-P are used to measure depression. The total score of each item included in the subscale was used to compute the summary of subscale score. T score of 65, or higher indicated scores at the borderline clinical threshold, whereas T score of 70, or higher indicated scores higher than the clinical threshold. T score of lower than 65 indicated normal cases.

To assess parental emotional styles, the PESQ originally consisted of 14 items from the Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire (29). Then, Havighurst and colleagues (30) added seven items that can assess fear, or worry,

and tweaked it into a gender-neutral questionnaire to enable fathers to complete it. The 21-item version of the PESQ was used in this study to assess parental emotional styles, whereby 11 items of the PESQ (items number 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 15, 18, 19, and 20) were included to assess emotion coaching parental style, and the remaining 10 items were used to assess emotion dismissing parental style. The PESQ was chosen due to its gender neutrality (enables a mother, or a father to complete this questionnaire) and this tool could assess parental emotional styles (emotion coaching or emotion dismissing parental styles).

The AFCS consisted of five domains: i) togetherness and harmony; ii) expression; iii) relationship and family dynamic; iv) conflict and centric; and v) religiosity and traditional practice. It became part of the study instrument to assess family values because this newly developed scale was exclusively designed to meet the needs of the Malaysian multi-ethnic population. Family values are diverse between Western and Asian cultures. The five domains in this scale represented five important areas in assessing family functions in the Asian context. Each domain comprised six items, therefore, the total number of items in the AFCS was 30. Family value referred to the total scores of all domains that can be obtained by summing up all domain scores. A total score of 75 and lower indicated a low family value, a score of 76–99 indicated a normal family value, and a score of 100 and higher indicated a high family value, which means good. AFCS has been validated locally and it has very good psychometric values. The overall Cronbach's alpha value for the AFCS was recorded as very good (0.90) (31).

A pilot study was conducted among 33 parents of primary school children. Based on the reliability test, the Cronbach's alpha values of the PESQ for emotion coaching and emotion dismissing parental styles were 0.90 and 0.94, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha of the AFCS in this pilot study was also very good (0.94). A research instrument for assessing anxiety in this study was the short version of the RCADS-parent version. The RCADS comprised 25 items that reflected all five prominent anxiety disorders, namely separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder. A pre-test of the RCADS-parent version was conducted. A total of 144 respondents completed the parent version of the RCADS. The reliability test showed that the Cronbach's alpha of the RCADS was 0.77 for each sub-scale of anxiety and depression. Meanwhile, the Cronbach's alpha for total anxiety and depression was 0.85. Therefore, RCADS with 25 items was chosen for this study to minimise the burden on the respondents, as well as administration time.

### Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 25,

was used to analyse the collected data. A normality test was performed and the data were normally distributed. Single linear regression was used to investigate the relationship between parental emotional styles and family values with anxiety. All independent variables with  $p$ -value  $< 0.25$  in the single linear regression were selected for further analysis. Multivariate linear regression analysis using the Enter method was performed to determine the predictors of anxiety. These tests were two-tailed, and the predictors of anxiety in this study were selected based on  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic characteristics

Table I shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. From the total number of respondents, 123 (82.0%) were females and 27 (18.0%) were males. A total of 94.7% of respondents were married, hold a degree (66.7%), and were working in the government sector (60.0%). The majority of the respondents' child were 12 years old (20.7%) and males (62%).

### Parental emotional style and family values

The mean score of emotion coaching was 38.35 (SD = 4.59), whereas, the mean score of emotion dismissing was 36.17 (SD = 4.07). Table II shows the family values of the respondents. The overall mean score of AFCS was 100.17 (SD = 9.4). According to the AFCS cut-off point of higher than 100, 53.3% ( $n = 80$ ) of the respondents have a high family value. Most of the respondents have the following good attributes: i) togetherness and harmony (94%); ii) expression (95.3%); iii) relationship and family dynamic (97.3%); iv) conflict or centric (91.3%); and v) religiosity and traditional practice (98.7%). The religiosity and traditional practice subdomain has the highest percentage among all subdomains under family values.

### Association analysis between variables

Single Linear Regression (SLR) in Table III shows the significant association between anxiety and emotion dismissing parenting style ( $p = 0.019$ ). A multiple linear regression analysis results, as shown in Table IV, show the relationships between anxiety and potential predictors.

## DISCUSSION

### Relationship between parental emotional styles and anxiety

This study has shown that parental emotional dismissing style, with parents avoiding, or being critical of children's emotions, can increase anxiety level in primary school children. This observation was consistent with previous findings that showed parents of children with anxiety tend to discourage expression and discussion of their children's emotions compared to parents of children without anxiety (32). Previously, the emotion-dismissing

**Table I: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Socio-demographic characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Parents' Gender		
Female	123	82
Male	27	18
Parental Marital status		
Married	142	94.7
Divorced	8	5.3
Parental Educational status		
STPM/SPM (Certificate of Malaysia Education)	19	12.7
Program Pre-University/Matriculation/Certificate	3	2.0
Diploma	28	18.7
First Degree	100	66.7
Parental Occupational status		
Private sector	26	17.3
Government sector	90	60.0
Others	34	22.7
Child's age (year)		
7	17	11.3
8	28	18.7
9	25	16.7
10	30	20.0
11	19	12.7
12	31	20.7
Child's gender		
Female	57	38
Male	93	62

**Table II: Family values of respondents**

Family values	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Togetherness and Harmony		
Poor	9	6
Good	141	94
Expression		
Poor	7	4.7
Good	143	95.3
Relationship and Family Dynamic		
Poor	4	2.7
Good	146	97.3
Conflict		
Poor	13	8.7
Good	137	91.3
Religiosity and Traditional Practice		
Poor	2	1.3
Good	148	98.7

parenting style has been linked to a decrease in emotion knowledge and social skills, and more conduct or behavioural problems among children (33, 34). This study has obtained further knowledge on the relationship between emotion-dismissing parenting style and anxiety in children.

The relationship between emotion-dismissing parental

**Table III: Association between parental emotional styles and family values with anxiety**

Variables	B	p value	95% Confidence Interval	
Parental Emotional styles				
Emotion Coaching	0.138	0.093	-0.023	0.292
Emotion Dismissing	0.191	0.019	0.035	0.386
Family Values	-0.138	0.093	-0.143	0.011

**Table IV: Predictors of Anxiety**

Parental and Family Factors	B	p value	95% Confidence Interval	
Parental Emotional Styles				
Emotion Coaching	0.043	0.652	-0.142	0.225
Emotion Dismissing	0.221	0.025*	0.031	0.457
Family Values	-0.202	0.016*	-0.175	-0.019

style and anxiety can be explained by the association of this parenting style with poor emotional regulation skills (35). Emotional dysregulation is further linked to anxiety, whereby children with anxiety disorder were found to have greater difficulty in regulating a range of negative emotions (4, 36). The results of this study are important to the body of knowledge, as they demonstrate the possibility of implementing emotion-focused parenting interventions, by focusing on the reduction of emotional dismissing style to address anxiety problems among school children. The positive effect of emotion coaching by parents can be seen not only in children, but also in adolescents, where they were reported to be more capable of regulating their anger and sadness (37).

This study has not found a significant association between emotion coaching and anxiety in children. This finding was supported by the results of another study that found emotion coaching offering no direct benefits for children's emotional outcome. However, emotion coaching interacted with emotion dismissing, such that it protected children from the negative effects of emotion dismissing (13). This could be due to less parenting stress among parents who practiced emotion coaching style. A recent randomised controlled trial study in China found that parents in the experimental group, who attended an emotion coaching parenting programme, reported significant decrease in parenting stress (38).

Theoretically, skilled emotion coaching parents could manage their children's emotion effortlessly, when they are able to recognise and view their children's emotion as a golden opportunity for intimacy. These parents are also able to assist their children in labelling their emotion correctly. This was supported by a previous study that recommended putting emotions into words, or using emotion labelling as a method of regulating emotions indirectly (39). When parents encourage children to have conversations about emotions, children's understanding of emotions will improve (40).

### Relationship between family values and anxiety

A statistically significant relationship between family values and anxiety in primary school children was found in this study. A high score in family values that consisted of the following: i) togetherness and harmony; ii) expression; iii) conflict; iv) relationship and family dynamic; and v) religiosity and traditional practice, when taken as a whole, can be a protective factor of anxiety in the target group. The results of this study were in line with the results of previous studies, which showed the influence of certain family factors on anxiety in children, including a lack of support and sociability, and having more conflicts (41–43).

A local study found that adolescents with poor family value have a significant association with anxiety (14). Additionally, togetherness and harmony (94%), expression (95.3%), and conflict (91.3%) were the three domains that scored the bottommost. Similarly, expression and conflict were found as the highest domains that contributed to poor family value in adolescents (14). Family conflict could prospectively lead to the development of anxiety symptoms by increasing the level of emotional insecurity in children regarding their family system (44).

The findings of this study were also supported by previous studies that found poor parent-child relationship characterised by high control and less warmth, and poor family cohesion as being related to anxiety in children, or adolescents (45–47). The prevalence of Malaysian adolescents having parental supervision, connectedness, and bonding were only 13.2%, 32.0%, and 42.6%, respectively (26). Connectedness was found to be one of the most important protective factors of mental health disorder among Malaysian youth (48). Therefore, fostering a good parent-child relationship for better expression of emotion within a family may reduce anxiety in children.

There is an urgent need to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of a family-based anxiety prevention programme for primary school children. If the family-based anxiety prevention programme is proven effective, it could be a useful tool for anxiety intervention as early as possible and parents could play vital roles in preventing childhood anxiety. Several parenting programmes are available in Malaysia, for example, the Parenting@Work by the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN). This study proposes that these parenting programmes put more emphasis on emotion-based parenting techniques, or practical tools, particularly when emotion dismissing style was shown to be associated with an increased risk of childhood anxiety. These parenting programmes can be implemented in several settings, for example, at schools, primary care centres, and community level (2). In the Malaysian school setting, school-based mental

health prevention programme is not available (49). Nonetheless, the positive effects of family-based school intervention programme on children's mental health status have been reported (50). Parental involvement could increase the efficacy of a child anxiety intervention programme.

### Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study was the representativeness of the study sample. This could be because the non-probability sampling method used. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the whole population. A more detailed study should be conducted using the probability sampling method to confirm the current findings. This cross-sectional study design also has the limitation of showing the causal relationship between variables. Additionally, relying on parental reports using the AFCS in particular, may not capture the correct perception of family values that their children have. Even though parents' reports of children's anxiety are widely used, this method may have affected the results because parents tend to underreport internalised symptoms. Future study could also measure family values and children's anxiety based on their own report.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study have revealed that there was a significant relationship between parental emotional styles and family values with anxiety in primary school children. As for the predictors of anxiety, emotion dismissing parenting style was found to be a risk factor of anxiety. In contrast, a high family value was found to be a protective factor of the development of anxiety. Mental health should be addressed during and after the current global health crisis by increasing public health awareness among primary school children via empowering parental roles.

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