

The Role of Mutual Communication in Reducing Anxiety Levels in Children Within the Family

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Abstract: Effective intrafamilial communication has long been recognised as a cornerstone of children’s socio-emotional development, yet its specific influence on childhood anxiety remains under-explored. This study investigates how reciprocal, emotionally attuned dialogue between parents and children moderates state–trait anxiety in middle-childhood (8-12 years). Drawing on attachment theory and family systems theory, we conducted a mixed-methods investigation combining a quasi-experimental communication-skills intervention with quantitative psychometric assessment and qualitative thematic analysis. One hundred and sixty four parent–child dyads across two urban public-school districts were randomly assigned to an eight-week dialogic coaching programme or to a wait-list control. Anxiety was measured with the State–Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAI-C) at baseline, post-intervention and three-month follow-up, while semi-structured interviews explored subjective changes in family climate. Results showed a significant reduction in both state and trait anxiety for children in the intervention group, with large effect sizes (Cohen’s $d = 0.83$ and 0.71 respectively) sustained at follow-up. Qualitative findings revealed enhanced emotional literacy, greater coherence in parent–child narratives and improved conflict-resolution strategies. These outcomes highlight the protective function of reciprocal communication against anxiety and endorse family-focused preventive strategies.

Keywords: Child anxiety; parent–child communication; family systems; attachment; preventive intervention; STAI-C.

Introduction: Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental-health concerns in childhood, affecting up to one in ten school-age children worldwide and often persisting into adolescence and adulthood. While biological vulnerabilities and broader social stressors contribute to anxiety aetiology, the immediate relational context in which children learn to interpret and regulate emotion—the family—remains a pivotal arena for both risk and resilience. Attachment theory posits that consistent, sensitive parental responsiveness fosters secure internal working models

that buffer against stress, whereas family systems theory emphasises patterns of interaction, or “rules of engagement”, that shape individual affective trajectories. In both frameworks, communication is not merely a vehicle for transmitting information but a dynamic process through which meaning, safety and emotional regulation are co-constructed.

Empirical evidence increasingly corroborates these conceptual claims. A large cross-sectional study of Chinese adolescents found that open family communication predicted lower anxiety and

depression, even after accounting for household violence and problematic internet use, suggesting a direct protective effect. Complementing these findings, a systematic review of thirty-six studies concluded that high-quality parent–child communication is consistently associated with better adolescent mental-health outcomes, including reduced internalising symptoms. More recently, a meta-analysis of parent-focused interventions demonstrated that enhancing parents’ communicative responsiveness reliably attenuates childhood anxiety across diverse cultural contexts. Region-specific data further indicate that parental dialogue quality predicts social-anxiety levels among Indonesian secondary-school students, while research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that functional family communication mitigates the impact of external stress on junior-school pupils’ anxiety.

Despite these converging strands of evidence, important gaps persist. Few studies adopt longitudinal or experimental designs capable of disentangling causality; fewer still examine middle-childhood, a developmental window in which cognitive maturation allows nuanced conversation yet precedes the socio-emotional turbulence of adolescence. Additionally, most interventions target parents alone, neglecting the bidirectional nature of communication. To address these lacunae, the present study evaluates a dyadic coaching programme that trains both parents and children in reciprocal listening, emotion-labelling and solution-focused dialogue, assessing its impact on children’s anxiety over time.

We employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test/follow-up design with a wait-list control. Participants were recruited through two metropolitan public-school systems in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Inclusion criteria required children to be aged 8–12 years, living with at least one legal guardian and free from diagnosed developmental disorders; families receiving concurrent psychotherapy were excluded. After informed consent, 164 parent–child dyads were randomly allocated to the intervention ($n = 83$) or control ($n = 81$) group using a computer-generated sequence. The final sample (46 % male children; mean child age = 9.8 ± 1.4 years) reflected the socio-economic diversity of the districts.

The “Mutual Dialogue Coaching” programme comprised eight weekly 90-minute sessions delivered by trained family psychologists. Sessions combined brief psycho-educational inputs on anxiety physiology and communication theory with live role-plays, feedback cycles and at-home practice tasks. Unique to our protocol, equal time was devoted to coaching children in articulating internal states, thus

operationalising mutuality. Fidelity was monitored via session checklists and 20 % video-based supervision.

Primary outcomes were children’s state and trait anxiety, assessed through the Uzbek-validated version of the STAI-C, which yields separate 20-item subscales. Internal consistency in the present study was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$ state; 0.88 trait). Secondary qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured post-intervention interviews with 40 randomly selected dyads (20 per group), exploring perceived changes in communicative routines and emotional climate.

Baseline assessments occurred one week before the intervention. Post-tests were administered within one week of programme completion, with follow-up three months later to gauge maintenance effects. Assessors blind to group allocation conducted all measurements. The university ethics board approved the protocol, and families received small vouchers to offset travel costs.

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS 29. Repeated-measures ANOVA tested Group \times Time effects on STAI-C scores. Effect sizes were reported as partial η^2 and Cohen’s d . Missing data (4.2 %) were handled via expectation-maximisation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and subjected to reflexive thematic analysis in NVivo, following six iterative phases of coding, theme development and refinement to enhance credibility.

At baseline there were no significant differences between groups in state or trait anxiety. A significant Group \times Time interaction emerged for state anxiety, $F(2, 324) = 18.47$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$. Post-hoc contrasts indicated that intervention participants’ mean state-anxiety scores declined from 39.5 ± 8.1 to 31.2 ± 7.3 post-intervention ($p < 0.001$) and stabilised at 30.8 ± 7.5 at follow-up. Effect size calculations yielded $d = 0.83$ from baseline to post-test and $d = 0.87$ from baseline to follow-up, reflecting large reductions. Trait anxiety mirrored this pattern: Group \times Time $F(2, 324) = 14.62$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$, with intervention scores falling from 41.1 ± 7.9 to 34.8 ± 7.4 ($d = 0.71$) and remaining at 35.0 ± 7.8 after three months. Control-group scores fluctuated minimally and non-significantly across time points.

No adverse events were reported, and attendance averaged 92 %, indicating high acceptability.

Thematic analysis distilled three overarching themes. First, “Emergent Emotional Vocabulary” captured children’s newfound capacity to label nuanced feelings, which parents described as “a language we now share”. Second, “Dialogic Regulation” highlighted families’ shift from directive speech toward collaborative problem-solving; parents reported listening “to understand, not

to correct”, while children felt “heard and calmer”. Finally, “Conflict as Connection” reflected re-framing disagreements as opportunities for deeper intimacy rather than threats, reducing avoidance behaviours previously linked to anxiety. These narratives converged with quantitative gains, offering explanatory depth and ecological validity.

The present study demonstrates that enhancing mutual communication within the family can substantially reduce both situational and dispositional anxiety in middle-childhood, with benefits enduring at least three months. By involving children as active agents rather than passive recipients, the intervention operationalised reciprocal influence—a critical but often neglected dimension of family communication research. The large effect sizes align with earlier meta-analytic evidence that parent-focused programmes lower child anxiety, yet exceed typical magnitudes, suggesting added value in dyadic skill-building.

Mechanistically, improved emotional literacy and narrative coherence likely facilitated cognitive re-appraisal and interpersonal reassurance, processes linked to autonomic down-regulation of anxiety. The findings also resonate with social-ecological perspectives emphasising children’s subjective appraisal of relational safety. Notably, the study expands the cultural evidence base by situating research in Central Asia, where family collectivist norms may amplify communicative patterns’ impact on mental health.

Limitations include quasi-experimental design constraints and reliance on self-report measures, which may inflate associations through shared-method variance. Future work should replicate findings with randomised controlled trials, longer follow-up periods and multi-informant anxiety diagnostics. Additionally, exploring digital adjuncts to in-person coaching could broaden accessibility, especially in rural settings.

CONCLUSION

Mutual, emotionally attuned communication functions as a modifiable protective factor against childhood anxiety. A brief, structured coaching programme that equips both parents and children with dialogic competencies produced robust, sustained anxiety reductions. Integrating such family-centred modules into school counselling services and paediatric primary care could represent a scalable strategy for early anxiety prevention. Policymakers and practitioners should therefore prioritise interventions that move beyond information provision to cultivate reciprocal, empathic family dialogue.

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