

Abstract

Adjustment problems, such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and behavior problems, are prevalent in our society, with one in five children being affected nationally (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2003). This project aims to better understand the links between children's physiological stress reactivity, as measured by respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), and adjustment problems in school-aged children. Research suggests that both gender and RSA-reactivity to stress may influence children's risk for displaying adjustment problems, but how the two interact is not well understood. This project explores whether male and female children show different patterns of RSA reactivity, and whether gender and RSA reactivity interact to predict adjustment problems. Data was collected with 34 8-10-year-olds and their parents via questionnaires and physiological recording of RSA over a mild stress-inducing mirror-tracing task. Parents completed the Child Behavioral Checklist, a measure of adjustment problems, and RSA-reactivity was calculated by comparing RSA during a baseline period vs. a stressful task. Data analysis is currently in progress. Levels of RSA-reactivity and adjustment problems will be compared across boys and girls, and RSA-reactivity will be examined as a moderator of the link between gender and adjustment problems. Regardless of the results, we must explore the interplay of gender and physiological reactivity of children in more depth to determine if these factors can help us detect early risk factors of adjustment problems in middle childhood.

Keywords: adjustment problems, middle childhood, gender, respiratory sinus arrhythmia.