Testing the exacerbation and attenuation hypotheses of the role of anxiety in the relation between ADHD and reactive/proactive aggression: A 10-year longitudinal study

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Abstract

Both anxiety and aggression commonly co-occur with ADHD symptoms. Two competing hypotheses describing the role of anxiety in aggression associated with ADHD symptoms have previously been advanced. The exacerbation hypothesis proposes that the presence of anxiety increases the risk of aggression in the context of ADHD symptoms. The attenuation hypothesis proposes that the presence of anxiety protects against aggression in the context of ADHD symptoms. We tested these hypotheses using moderated cross-lagged panel models in the Zurich project on social development from childhood to adulthood (z-proso) sample using both self-report (3 waves) and informant-report (8 waves) data spanning ages 7-17. We found evidence that anxiety protects against both reactive and proactive aggression; however, the effect was direct: there was no evidence for anxiety moderating the strength of ADHD symptom-aggression links. Results suggest that anxiety likely plays an important role in inhibiting aggression but does not interact with ADHD symptoms in the manner predicted by either the exacerbation or attenuation hypothesis.