

## Social anxiety in children

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### **Аннотация**

Results of research on social anxiety in orphaned children are presented in this article. The goal of this study was to identify the relationship between depressive states, anxiety states, characteristics of the situation at school, and fear of social evaluation in orphaned children. The differences in these parameters between orphaned children and children living with their families were also studied. The sample consisted of 123 teenagers. The main group comprised 57 orphans from an orphanage near the Moscow region, aged 10 to 16 years old. The control group comprised 66 students from a general school, aged 10 to 15 years old, and all living with their families. Differences were found in the parameters studied. The orphans were characterized by higher levels of social and general anxiety. On the one hand, they strove for the attention and approval of adults, but, on the other hand, they were more worried than their peers who lived with their families about the impression they made on others. They were afraid of receiving a negative evaluation.

**Ключевые слова:** anxiety, depressiveness, social anxiety, situation at school, fear of social evaluation, orphaned children



Orphanhood is one of the major problems in Russia. According to 2010 data there are about 700 thousand orphaned children in Russia (Rudov, Mityasova, & Katyushkina, 2011). The majority of them live in various kinds of orphanages. This experience has a negative influence on children's development. The emotional sphere is the first to suffer in children living in orphanages (Avdeeva, 2009; Bowlby, 2004; Chuprova, 2007; Lisina, 2009). For a long time it was thought that psychological disorders identified in orphans were connected with bad social conditions (such as insufficient medical care or a limited-information environment). These factors are of course important to the development of a child; however the main reason for psychological problems in orphans is not the quality of their living conditions. J. Bowlby and R. A. Spitz showed the importance of maternal care for the child's development. Based on their work it was possible to establish the importance of a close emotional connection with the mother (or the significant adult figure) (Bowlby, 2004; Spitz, 2001). If this connection is missing, maternal deprivation occurs. This is one of the factors that lead to the development of emotional disorders. Orphans have difficulty identifying and understanding emotions and expressing their own emotions; they are characterized by lack of a clearly formed self-image and low self-esteem (Avdeeva, 2009; Chuprova, 2007; Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007; Zalygina & Smirnova, 1985). Living outside a family and having a deficit in communication with significant adult figures lead to scarceness of communication skills, difficulties in social-role identification, problems in gender-identity formation, and distorted images of parent-child relationships (Chuprova, 2007; Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007; Romanovskiy, 2009; Zalygina & Smirnova, 1985). Many researchers have identified a deficit in creative activities and cognitive motivation (Bozhovich, 2008; Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007).

Thus, living in orphanages decreases the ability of orphans to adapt to and interact with the world and other people. A deficit of behavior strategies that help adaptation may lead to social anxiety in orphaned children. Studying the characteristics of emotional development of orphaned children and teenagers — for example, the display of social anxiety — will allow us to find ways of adapting them to society.



## Social anxiety

Up to the present time the social-anxiety phenomenon has rarely been studied in Russia. Among studies dedicated to this topic one can highlight the research of I.V. Nikitina and A.B. Kholmogorova (Nikitina & Kholmogorova, 2010) and of V.V. Krasnova (Krasnova & Kholmogorova, 2011). "The term social anxiety is understood as a type of anxiety which is triggered by various kinds of situations involving social interactions" (Nikitina & Kholmogorova, 2010, 80). When people with a high level of social anxiety connect with other people, they experience emotional discomfort and feel anxious about the impression they are making and about how they look in the eyes of others. The mildest form of social anxiety is shyness (Zimbardo, 1991). The most severe form of social anxiety is social phobia, which is identified as a separate diagnostic category in DSM-IV and ICD-10.

Research has shown that social anxiety in teenagers and adults may be connected to suicidal ideation, substance abuse aimed at alleviating the psychological state, and depressive states (Beidel & Turner, 1998, in Nikitina & Kholmogorova, 2011, 82.). A tendency to decrease the frequency of social contacts may lead to a decrease in educational and professional activities and to the deterioration of the quality of interpersonal relationships, sometimes even to social isolation. Research done by Zimbardo (1991) shows that shy children and students are less likely than children and students who are not shy to initiate a conversation, more likely to experience difficulties in ambiguous social situations (where there are no regulations, instructions, or rules), and more likely to be unable to ask for help. The inability to address others leads to worsening of the student-teacher contact and, in turn, may lead to difficulties in school and may impair academic progress. Research conducted by Belyakova (2011) shows that there is a connection between social anxiety, markers of emotional troubles, and perfectionism.

The consequence of social anxiety in orphans may be even more disadaptation than in nonorphans because of the structure of their social communication. The need for acknowledgement and support prevails in orphans; their leading motive in communication is personal (Lisina, 2009). The main factors motivating children to communicate are attention and anticipation of an adult's evaluation. In their interactions with adults children living in orphanages are more concentrated on obtaining support from the adult than on engaging in joint activities with the adult (Zalysina & Smirnova,



1985). When meeting new people orphans are drawn toward adults: they try to obtain their attention and at the same time to steer them away from their peers. Their communication skills are insufficient for establishing adequate interactions with both adults and peers. All these problems can further increase anxiety and make the emotional disturbances chronic. To summarize, social anxiety is closely connected with indexes of anxiety and depression and lead to the worsening of a child's quality of life. It follows that research in this field is extremely important and timely.

## **Organization of the research**

### **The surveyed group**

The goal of this study was to identify the connection between depressive states, anxiety, school conditions, and the fear of social evaluation in orphaned children. The authors also examined the differences in these parameters between a group of orphaned children and a group of children living in families.

A total of 123 children and teenagers were studied. The main group consisted of 57 children from an orphanage near Moscow; they were 10 to 16 years old. The control group comprised 66 students of a Moscow school; they 10 to 15 years old. The groups were matched by sex and age.

All children who took part in the study (both orphans and children living with their families) obtained permission from their parents or official guardians to participate in psychological research. SPSS for Windows, Standard Version 17.0, was used to process data.

### **The methodological complex**

The methodological complex included the following questionnaires:

- Personality Anxiety Scale (developed by A. M. Prihozhan in 1980-1983)
- Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; developed by M. Kovacs in 1992, adapted by A. B. Kholmogorova, S. V. Volikova, and O. G. Kalina in 2011)
- Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) Scale (fear of social evaluation; developed by D. Watson and R. Friend in 1969)



- Situation at School Questionnaire (developed by V. K. Zaretskiy and A. B. Kholmogorova in 2006)

## Results and discussion

The orphans and children living in families were compared according to their levels of depression, anxiety, and fear of social evaluation. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentage of children with high levels of depression, anxiety, and social anxiety was higher in the group of orphaned children than in the group of children living in families. For example, a high level of depressiveness was identified in 17.5% of orphans and in 9.1% of children in families; a high level of anxiety, in 17.5% and 6.0%, respectively. A high level of social anxiety was seen in 35.1% of orphans and in 19.7% of children in families.

**Table 1.** Distribution of orphans and children living in families based on degree of depression (CDI), anxiety (Personality Anxiety Scale), and fear of social evaluation (FNE Scale), in percent

	Low level		Medium level		High level	
	Orphanage	Family	Orphanage	Family	Orphanage	Family
Depressiveness	57.8 % (N=33)	71.2 % (N=47)	24.5 % (N=14)	19.7 % (N=13)	17.5 % (N=10)	9.1% (N=6)
Anxiousness	70.2 % (N=40)	78.8 % (N=52)	12.3 % (N=7)	15.2 % (N=10)	17.5 % (N=10)	6.0% (N=4)
Fear of social evaluation	12.3 % (N=7)	31.8 % (N=21)	52.6 % (N=30)	48.5 % (N=32)	35.1 % (N=20)	19.7 % (N=13)

Table 2 compares levels of social anxiety in the main and control groups. Means of fear of social anxiety in orphans were higher than the means of their peers who lived with their families. The results confirm the assumption that orphans are geared more toward the evaluation of others and experience anxiety in situations that involve



social contacts; these results correspond with the results of studies that were mentioned in the analytical section (Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007).

**Table 2.** Comparison of social-evaluation indexes of orphans and children living in families (FNE Scale)

	Orphanage (n = 57) M (SD)	Family (n = 66) M (SD)	Mann-Whitney criteria	U	p significance level
Fear of social evaluation	16.6 (5.8)	13.7 (6.7)	1376.500		.010*

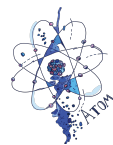
\*p < .05.

As seen in Table 3, all anxiety indexes were higher in orphans than in children who live in families. Significant differences were found in the self-evaluation, magical, and general-anxiety indexes. Thus, one can say that orphans have higher levels of anxiety and stress than do children living in families. They are most often worried about not meeting demands and are unhappy with themselves. In addition, orphans are suspicious more often than their peers who live in families: they connect various problems with external, even supernatural, factors they cannot influence. Such perceptions can originate in and be supported by the special characteristics of the secluded environment they live in.

Significant differences in levels of depression were not found. However, qualitative and quantitative analyses show that virtually all markers were higher in the orphans than in the children living in families. Analysis of the answers given by children from the orphan group to the separate questions of the CDI shows that they evaluated themselves negatively more often than did their peers from families.

**Table 3.** Comparison of anxiety levels of orphans and children living in families (Personality Anxiety Scale)

Scales	Orphanage (n = 57) M (SD)	Family (n = 66) M (SD)	Mann-Whitney criteria	U	p significance level
School anxiety	13.0 (7.5)	11.8 (6.6)	1784.000		.622
	15.0 (6.5)	11.3 (7.2)	1254.500		.001**



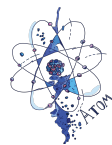
Self-evaluation anxiety				
Interpersonal anxiety	13.9 (7.8)	11.9 (7.5)	1594.500	.146
Magical anxiety	12.7 (8.5)	9.0 (7.5)	1404.500	.016*
General anxiety	54.5 (24.1)	43.8 (24.0)	1443.000	.026*

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

School problems and characteristics of the situation at school were also compared for the two groups. The Situation at School Questionnaire aims at evaluating the favorability of the conditions at school in general and also evaluates parameters such as the attitude of the child to education, educational difficulties, relationships with teachers and classmates (the Friends Scale), presence of and tendency toward truant behavior, and spending of in-school free time.

**Table 4.** Comparison of indexes of the school problems of orphans and children living in families (Situation at School Questionnaire)

Scales	Orphan age (n = 57) M (SD)	Family (n = 66) M (SD)	Mann-Whitney U criteria	p significance level
Attitude toward school	12.8 (1.7)	13.0 (1.7)	1684.500	.293
Problems in education	11.6 (2.9)	11.9 (2.8)	1720.000	.411
Problems in education	14.1 (2.0)	13.2 (2.2)	1437.500	.022*
Teachers	13.7 (2.5)	12.6 (2.7)	1397.500	.013*
Truancy	10.8 (2.6)	10.8 (2.6)	1866.000	.939



Friends Free time	13.7 (2.7)	9.7 (3.4)	678.500	.000**
General index of school conditions	77.0 (9.2)	71.1 (9.3)	1217.500	.001**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Comparison of the results of both groups on the Situation at School Questionnaire (Table 4) shows that, in comparison with the children living in families, the orphans evaluated their school situation as being safer and were more satisfied with it. Orphans believed that their relationships with teachers were better and that their free time was better organized. According to self-reports the orphans were less truant. Relationships with teachers can be the result of the initial attitude of the children toward teachers in general: orphans often perceive teachers as significant adults, with whom they find it easier to communicate than with peers (Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007). The better attendance of orphans can be explained by the difficulty of skipping classes in a closed facility. It is obvious that the conditions for spending free time are also different for orphans and for children who live in families. Children and teenagers who live in orphanages communicate mainly with each other and are used to taking part in common events and extracurricular activities. The school was located in the orphanage so it may have been more difficult for children to separate school and nonschool free time. By summarizing the data obtained in the comparison of the two groups, one can conclude that the hypothesis about the differences in fear of social evaluation, depressiveness, anxiety, and situation at school has been almost fully confirmed.

The results of the correlation analysis should also be considered (Table 5). In both analyzed groups (orphans and students from families) a positive correlation was found between fear of social evaluation and anxiety. As the fear of social evaluation increases so does anxiety in all areas under investigation: in-school free time, self-evaluation, interpersonal contacts, belief in the supernatural, and general level of anxiety. Thus, we can conclude that social anxiety is connected with an increase in pressure and stress in all the other activities of the child.

**Table 5.** Correlation between fear of social evaluation (FNE Scale) and anxiety level (Personality Anxiety Scale) in orphaned children and children living in families,  $r$ -spearman correlation coefficient





Scales	Fear of social evaluation	
	Orphanage	Family
In-school free time anxiety	.306*	.365**
Self-evaluation anxiety	.381**	.471**
Interpersonal anxiety	.445**	.487**
Magical anxiety	.314*	.383*
General anxiety index	.421**	.507**

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01.

Fear of social evaluation was connected with the general depression index in orphans (Table 6). Across the sample, fear of social evaluation was also connected with manifestations of depression (such as negative mood, school problems, negative self-appraisal, and the opinion that there is very little one can deal with successfully). These results correspond to those of earlier studies (Krasnova & Kholmogorova, 2011).

**Table 6.** Correlation between fear of social evaluation (FNE Scale) and level of depressiveness (CDI) in orphaned children and children living in families, r-spearman correlation coefficient

	Fear of social evaluation	
	Orphanage	Family
General depression index	.388*	.352*

\* p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

Fear of social evaluation in the orphans was connected with such parameters of the situation at school as relationships with teachers, truancy tendency, satisfaction with the use of free time, as well as with the general index of school conditions (Table 7). At first glance a seemingly paradoxical result is seen: the higher the fear of social evaluation, the fewer school problems a child had. Many of the reasons for this paradox were explained above. In addition, there are further reasons for the connection between fear of social evaluation and fewer absences. Orphans believe that being truant can lead to conflicts with and the disapproval of teachers; they are anxious about these consequences and thus try not to be absent from their



lessons. Correspondingly, as the level of social anxiety increases, so does anxiety about being negatively evaluated and about disapproval and punishment, all of which increase the tendency to be less truant. According to research done by Prihozhan, orphans have become accustomed to obeying rules and desire to be externally controlled (Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007). The habit of living according to a routine, with strict discipline, as well as the organization of the orphans' lives and the characteristics of their environment (a confined facility) all contributed to the fact that the number of absences among orphans was not that high.

**Table 7.** Correlation between fear of social evaluation (FNE Scale) and school problems (Situation at School Questionnaire) in orphaned children and children living in families, r-spearman correlation coefficient

Scales	Fear of social evaluation	
	Orphanage	Family
Attitude toward education	.122	-.053
Difficulties in education	.168	.076
Teachers	.346**	.048
Truancy	.303*	.117
Friends	.219	.008
Free time	.464**	.260*
General index of school conditions	.410**	.180

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

Some correlations within the group of orphaned children can at first sight seem paradoxical. An example is the connection between an increase in social anxiety and improvement in relationships with teachers. But, as mentioned above, an understanding of the teachers' role in the life of such children explains this relationship. In children without family experiences an increase in anxiety about social situations makes them more likely to consult a teacher, and they will try to improve the relationship with the teacher because they see the teacher as a person who is able to help them overcome fears and anxieties.



In regard to the connection of fear of social evaluation and satisfaction with spending free time, free time is a habitual activity for a child and is a source of pleasure. Fear of social evaluation does not spread to this area because here the child feels confident and safe. If there is fear of social evaluation, the child tries to avoid unusual situations or unfamiliar people.

Correlation analysis showed individual connections between depression and school difficulties. It should be noted that in the group of children living in families these connections were seen more often than in the group of orphaned children. For instance, in students who lived in families a negative evaluation of themselves and of their educational abilities was connected with the worsening of relationships with teachers and friends ( $p = .460^*$ ;  $p = .406^*$ ). Difficulties at school turned out to be connected with communication: an increase in school problems was connected with worsening relationships with friends ( $p = .327^*$ ) and the emergence of the feeling of being excluded from the peer environment ( $p = .420^*$ ). In general the worsening of the situation at school was connected with an increase in depressive symptoms ( $p = .409^*$ ). In summary the differences between the main and control groups should be highlighted. Social interaction is very important both for orphaned children and for children living in families. However, contacts with adults are more important for orphans, while contacts with peers are more important for children who live in families. These data correspond with the results of the research reviewed in the theoretical section of this article. Difficulties in contacts with others, especially peers, and relying on external evaluation are both also characteristic of children from orphanages (Zalysina & Smirnova, 1985; Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007).

## Conclusions

Two groups of children were studied: orphans and children living with their families. Based on the results of the study the authors conclude that there are differences between these groups in their anxiety indexes, in their level of fear of social evaluation, and in their situation at school. Orphans are characterized by a higher anxiety levels than children from families. For example, statistically significant differences in self-evaluation anxiety and magical anxiety were found. The level of fear of social evaluation is also higher in orphans than in their peers who live in families. Thus, orphans are geared more toward external evaluation, are more anxious about it,



and experience more stress when interacting with others. Children who live in orphanages see their situation at school as being more favorable than do children who live in families. For instance, differences in attitudes toward teachers, truancy, and free time within the school should be noted. Orphans are more satisfied with their relationships with teachers. They skip classes less often, a fact that can be explained largely by living conditions: orphans have fewer opportunities for unexcused absences from lessons. Orphans are also more satisfied with their in-school free time, as opposed to children with families, who evaluate this parameter as less satisfying. There were no significant differences in levels of depressiveness; we assume this finding is connected with the quantitative composition of both samples. Correlations were discovered between anxiety, fear of social evaluation, situation at school, and depressiveness both for each group separately and for the sample as a whole.

Based on the results of this study we can conclude that, compared with children from families, orphans are characterized more by problems in interpersonal communication. This characterization is the result of the specific structure of communication in children from orphanages. Children who live in orphanages are characterized by higher levels of social anxiety. On the one hand, they strive for attention from and approval by adults, and, on the other hand, they are more worried than their peers living in families about the impression they will make on others, and they are afraid to get a negative evaluation. The obtained data suggest that orphans need psychological training programs that will help them adapt, form and develop social competencies, and improve their communication skills. These skills will help decrease the level of social anxiety and will ease the process of socialization, which is important for them when they leave the orphanage.

## **Study limitations**

All answers on the questionnaires are self-reports. These questionnaires didn't take into account the level of social desirability of the options presented. Also important to note is the fact that self-understanding, self-awareness, and reflection in orphaned children can be poorly developed, as is supported by a number of previous studies (Prihozhan & Tolstyh, 2007). This limitation should also be considered when interpreting results. Another limitation is the small sample size. Because of these limitations, the conclusions of this



study are preliminary. All the mentioned limitations will be taken into account in future research on the topic.

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