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Physical Abuse Amplifies Attention to Threat and Increases Anxiety in Children

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Two experiments using event-related potentials (ERPs) examined the extent to which early traumatic experiences affect children's ability to regulate voluntary and involuntary attention to threat. The authors presented physically abused and nonabused comparison children with conflicting auditory and visual emotion cues, posed by children's mothers or a stranger, to examine the effect of emotion, modality, and poser familiarity on attention regulation. Relative to controls, abused children overattended to task-relevant visual and auditory anger cues. They also attended more to task-irrelevant auditory anger cues. Furthermore, the degree of attention allocated to threat statistically mediated the relationship between physical abuse and child-reported anxiety. These findings indicate that extreme emotional experiences may promote vulnerability for anxiety by influencing the development of attention regulation abilities.

Keywords: ERP, attention regulation, emotion, anxiety, physical abuse

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