Introduction

Overgeneralization of conditioned fear is associated with anxiety disorders in adults (e.g., Lissek et al., 2010; Lissek & Grillon, 2012; Lissek et al., 2014)

Studies investigating fear generalization in children are rare (e.g., Glenn et al., 2012; Schiele, Reinhard et al., 2016) even though the median onset of most anxiety disorders lies already in childhood (e.g., Beesdo et al., 2010)

Hypotheses:
(1) generalization in children is negatively correlated with age.
(2) participants with anxiety disorders would show generally higher responses as well as overgeneralization when compared to healthy controls.

Methods

Experiment 1: 133 healthy children and adolescents, aged 8–17 years
Experiment 2: 39 anxiety-disordered children and adolescents compared to 40 healthy controls, aged 10-17 years

Paradigm: discriminative fear conditioning and generalization paradigm (Schiele, Reinhard et al., 2016)

Outcome measures

Arousal ratings (1 = very calm – 9 = very excited)
Valence ratings (1 = very unpleasant - 9 = very pleasant)
UCS expectancy ratings 0-100% in 10% increments
(1 = very implausible/zero percent probable – 11 = very sure/100% probable)
Skin conductance responses (SCR)

Results

Experiment 1:

Experiment 2:

Conclusions

1. Sig. association between fear learning / generalization and age (8-17y): GI score decreases with increasing age
2. Fear learning/generalization is modulated by anxiety: quantitative not qualitative differences
3. Longitudinal studies are required clarify the role of FG in the development of anx. disorders