Cortisol Reactivity and Affective Attention Bias: The Intricacies of Social Problem-Solving in School-Aged Children

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Introduction

- Children use social problem-solving (SPS) to effectively interact with others via recognizing the complexities of social situations, self-regulating, and tailoring responses in ways that help them maintain or gain social standing (D’Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2004).
- Little research has investigated how children’s response to stress, such as cortisol reactivity, influences their social capabilities.
- Prior research regarding the association between cortisol reactivity and SPS are modest or inconsistent (Allwood et al., 2011; Blair, Granger, & Razza, 2005).
- Affective attention bias may help explain variations in this association.

Participants

Sample
- 238 children and their families
- 52% girls
- Mage at Wave 1 = 4.4 years

Ethnicity/Race
- 68% White
- 18% Black
- 14% Multiracial or Other
- 16% Latino

Socioeconomic Status
- Median Income = $73,000
- 36% receiving public assistance

Aims

1. Examine whether higher cortisol reactivity is predictive of SPS characteristics including children’s constructive problem-solving (CPS) abilities and their hostile intent attribution (HIA) one year later.
2. Determine if affective attention bias moderates the association between cortisol reactivity and SPS.

Methodology & Results

Methods at Wave 1 & 2

Cortisol Reactivity to Cognitive Challenges
The residual of 2 salivatory samples: one taken prior to administration of cognitive tasks (i.e., timed puzzle and silly stroop) and another 20 minutes post task completion.

Quadrant
Passive viewing task capturing children’s duration of looking time to emotional faces (i.e., happy, sad, angry, neutral) via eye tracking technology (see photo depiction).

STEP-P Provocation
Assesses children’s SPS (i.e., CPS and HIA) through observer ratings of their open-ended responses to interview questions regarding 10 second vignettes depicting challenging peer interactions.

Results
Higher cortisol reactivity consistently predicted higher CPS across all four paths, βs > .19, p < 0.05. Heightened cortisol reactivity in conjunction with greater attention bias toward anger predicted lower HIA (i.e., greater SPS), β = -0.19, p = 0.03 (see above figure).

Conclusions

Understanding the impact children’s stress response has on their ability to construct effective solutions to complex social situations offers insight into what aspects of development future interventions should be targeting.

This is especially vital for children growing up in high stress environments who are more likely exhibit cortisol production impairment (Repetti et al., 2011).

Additionally, our research provides partial evidence for the moderating effects of affective attention bias on the association between cortisol reactivity and SPS.

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