





RESEARCH

“Be careful, it’s dangerous out there”: Threat beliefs, anxiety, and mindfulness in overprotective parenting

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Abstract

Objective: We examined whether parents’ beliefs about the world as a threatening place are related to overprotective parenting, that is, parents’ provision of excessive protection considering their child’s developmental level.

Background: Overprotection may occur in a societal context of perceived threats. Although motivated by good intentions in such context, it is associated with negative outcomes in adolescents.

Method: In a sample of mothers and fathers of 320 adolescents, this questionnaire-based study examined actor and partner effects in the association between threat beliefs and overprotective parenting, using actor–partner interdependence modeling, in association with parents’ anxiety and mindfulness.

Results: Both actor effects (i.e., both maternal and paternal threat beliefs related positively to their overprotection) and partner effects (i.e., mothers’ and fathers’ overprotection related to their partner’s beliefs, above and beyond their own beliefs) were identified. A higher level of anxiety was associated with more overprotection, whereas mindfulness predicted less overprotection. No partner effects were identified for anxiety or mindfulness. We found evidence for maternal anxiety moderating the relation between maternal threat beliefs and maternal overprotection.

Conclusion: Both parents’ threat beliefs were associated with overprotective parenting and were mutually related. Anxiety and mindfulness were also related to overprotection.

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Implications: This study provides insight for clinicians and parents into the role of threat beliefs for understanding overprotective parenting and the role of family dynamics, as well as individual-level factors (i.e., anxiety and mindfulness).

KEYWORDS

actor–partner interdependence modeling, anxiety, mindfulness, overprotective parenting, threat beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Parents may be worried about the future of their children for a variety of reasons (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2018), some of which may be related to a perception of the world as a threatening place. In response to a negative perception of the societal and cultural macrocontext in which their child is developing (e.g., societal-level threats), some parents may feel compelled to respond with targeted and decisive behavior to regain a sense of security and certainty, and may use more controlling parenting (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024). However, there is little empirical research explicitly examining whether parents' perceptions of the world as a threatening place would be related to more parental overprotection (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005).

Furthermore, at a family level, mothers' and fathers' threat beliefs may be constructed within a dynamic family system in which the beliefs of one parent may be related to the other parent's overprotective parenting, above and beyond his or her own beliefs (Van Petegem et al., 2022). Whereas most previous studies have focused on mothers, family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) and socioecological approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) of child development emphasize the interconnection between family members. Specifically, evidence of carry over effects between parents on their parenting have been found in previous research (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to examine the association between parental threat beliefs and overprotective parenting, as well as whether parental overprotection is associated with the other parent's threat beliefs, thereby making use of actor–partner interdependence models. In addition, it has also been argued that individual-level characteristics may explain why some parents may be sensitive to threat cues and more inclined to overprotect their children (Lindhout et al., 2006). For this reason, we examined whether the association between threat beliefs and overprotection is moderated by parental anxiety and mindfulness.

Overprotective parenting during adolescence

Overprotective parenting involves the provision of a level of protection that is excessive, taking into consideration the developmental level of the child (Thomasgard et al., 1995). Herein, we focus on parents of adolescents, as adolescence covers a developmental period where children strive for more independence and autonomy (e.g., Smetana & Rote, 2019). Consequently, some parents may feel that they have less knowledge about their adolescent's whereabouts and relationships, particularly in cases of risk-taking attitudes, and may be prone to protect their adolescents in ways that do not meet their developmental needs (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Such overprotection may translate into various parenting practices, such as anxious rearing (e.g., immediately focusing on the dangers whenever the adolescents want to try something new), premature problem-solving (e.g., taking tasks out of the hands of the adolescents without giving them the opportunity to try themselves), infantilization (e.g., treating adolescents like

young children), or privacy invasion (e.g., reading messages on the adolescents' phone; Brenning et al., 2017). The degree to which specific practices are experienced as overprotective depends on several factors, including the developmental stage and the specific sociocultural context. However, practices are considered overly protective when they exceed the developmental needs in that specific sociocultural context.

Although such overprotective parenting aims at protecting the adolescent, its consequences on youngsters may be deleterious, as it may interfere with adolescents' development of coping skills, autonomy, and positive perceptions of oneself. Indeed, there is now abundant research documenting that overprotective parenting is linked to a range of psychosocial difficulties in adolescents and young adults (Zhang & Ji, 2024). For example, it is associated with more anxious and depressive symptoms, higher risk of medication for such symptoms (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011), social anxiety symptoms (Mathijs et al., 2023), internalizing and externalizing problems (Arslan et al., 2023), and low self-esteem and self-efficacy (Reed et al., 2016). It is also associated with less autonomous self-regulation and insecure attachment (Levitt et al., 2022) and lower levels of life satisfaction. In sum, there exists substantial knowledge about the negative correlates of overprotection for adolescents' psychosocial functioning in the sociocultural context of Western countries where the previously cited studies were conducted. However, questions remain regarding its antecedents and how overprotective parenting can be embedded within the family system.

Consistent with Grolnick et al.'s (1996) model describing how different sources of pressure are predictive of parenting, previous research identified multiple factors that help to explain why some parents engage in overprotective parenting. In particular, past research found evidence for child factors (e.g., shyness, inhibition; Möller et al., 2016) and parental factors (e.g., parental anxiety, neuroticism; Segrin et al., 2013). However, less attention has been paid to context-related factors, such as parents' negative perceptions of the world. For this reason, we focus on parents' beliefs about the threatening nature of their environment.

Threat beliefs about the world and overprotective parenting

Research findings on parents' perception of threats indicate that most parents in Western societies have immediate access to information, including about how our living conditions are threatened (e.g., climate change, economic crisis, pandemics, wars), which may contribute to negative perceptions of the world (Robichaud et al., 2020). As described by Duckitt et al. (2002) and later Perry et al. (2013), some people believe that we live in a threatening and unpredictable world and may feel nervous when thinking about the dangers to which children are exposed. On the contrary, others believe that the world is a relatively safe and stable place in which there are opportunities for everyone. These worldviews, which may or may not be accurate, make people more or less sensitive to cues about threats that arouse anxiety and attentional vigilance, and motivate approach-oriented actions to relieve this anxiety (Jonas et al., 2014).

In particular, the way parents perceive threats to their offspring may explain why some parents may become hypervigilant and overprotective (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024). When parents perceive economic or societal indicators of scarcity of resources, harsh environment, or instability, they may feel that their children's future well-being is at risk. As a defensive reaction to threats, this may increase their propensity to protect their child from situations they perceive as potentially harmful by solving problems for them or by being controlling (i.e., using pressure and coercion to have their child behave in particular ways or achieve specific outcomes).

This was documented by Gurland and Grolnick (2005) who observed that parents who perceived their children's environment as more threatening also relied more heavily on controlling parenting when interacting with their children during a homework-like task in the laboratory. Using a self-determination theory perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2008), they concluded in their

observational study among 40 mothers that controlling parenting (vs. autonomy supportive) was associated with threat perception. These results were confirmed by these authors in a recent longitudinal study among 170 children and their parents (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024).

Using an experimental design, Robichaud et al. (2020) established a causal relation of perceived contextual threats on controlling parenting practices among 101 mothers using a false journalistic report that portrayed a pessimistic outlook on children's future and a guided learning task. Results showed that the more mothers perceived a threat for the future of their child, the more they felt pressured to teach their child in a controlling way (i.e., invalidating the child's rhythm and frame of reference, using intrusive guidance vs. hints, and providing judgmental vs. descriptive feedback), rather than supporting their child's autonomy. Similarly, recent research showed that higher levels of perceived job insecurity related to more controlling school involvement (Van Petegem et al., 2025) and that threat perception was associated with over-involved parenting regarding children's achievements (Journault et al., 2025). These results indicate that controlling parenting may be used as a protective response to perceived threats.

Yet, no studies to date have examined the association of parents' perceived threat and over-protective parenting. Overprotective and controlling parenting are positively correlated (Chevrier et al., 2023) and share some features, such as the limited use of autonomy support (e.g., not encouraging children to initiate and make their own choices; Venard et al., 2023) and the reliance upon intrusive strategies. However, control involves practices that are not included in the conceptualization of overprotection, such as guilt induction, love withdrawal, and shaming or physical punishment (Barber, 1996). Overprotection, however, also includes an excessively anxious component, reflected in the infantilization of the child, excessive physical or social contact, and being overly concerned about the well-being of the child.

Considering this anxious component of overprotection and the triggering potential of threat perception on the need to protect, we hypothesized that parents who perceive more threat will be more prone to overprotect their child. Moreover, as past research on parents' threat perceptions and parenting mostly focused on mothers, little is known about whether mothers and fathers differ in their perceptions of threat, whether these perceptions are differentially related to overprotection for mothers versus fathers, and whether mothers' and fathers' threat perceptions and overprotection are interrelated. Therefore, in the present study, we examined the association between parents' threat beliefs and overprotection from a family systems perspective.

Overprotection in family systems: Examining actor and partner effects

Overprotection, as most parenting behavior, does not occur independently from the wider family context. First, from a family systems perspective (Reiss & Oliveri, 1980), threat beliefs function as a family paradigm or second-order process that can be described as a structure of beliefs, implicit assumptions, and convictions that families hold about the world. Overprotection, by contrast, is a first-order behavior that is concrete, observable, and guided by those underlying beliefs. When families interpret the world as dangerous, overprotection becomes a logical expression of that paradigm. In this light, overprotection may not be merely excessive caution but an enactment of a worldview characterized by fear, scarcity, or insecurity.

Moreover, from a family systems theory perspective (Cox & Paley, 1997), which views development as resulting from the transactional regulatory processes of dynamic systems, it is deemed important to consider the circular process in which parents contribute to and respond to characteristics of their adolescent and the other parent. Specifically, past research has shown that the quality of the coparenting relationship (i.e., the degree of collaboration or conflict between parental figures in their parenting role) is associated with parenting behavior (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Indeed, it has been suggested that dynamics between parental figures should be considered for understanding parenting, including overprotection (Van Petegem

et al., 2022). Previous studies showed, for example, mutual influences of mothers and fathers on autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting (Guay et al., 2018).

Actor–partner interdependence modeling (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010) has been used to operationalize this family systems theory by examining not only whether one parent's child-rearing is predicted by their own individual characteristics (i.e., an actor effect), but also whether this is explained by the other parent's characteristics (i.e., a partner effect), above and beyond the actor's characteristics. This has contributed to widening the scope of research on family functioning, usually focused on mothers (Levitt et al., 2022), by including fathers (Arslan et al., 2023) and the interaction between mothers' and fathers' characteristics (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018). With this aim, Jocson (2021) investigated, for instance, whether negative parenting of both mothers and fathers (harsh parenting and rejection) was explained not only by their own depressive symptoms (i.e., actor effect) but also by their partner's depressive symptoms (i.e., partner effect). Using a similar actor–partner interdependence model (APIM) design, Eira Nunes et al. (2024) found evidence for a significant positive relation between mothers' gender equality values and fathers' warm parenting and coparenting support.

With a few exceptions, there is a scarcity of studies that consider both actor and partner effects within the family system when studying overprotection. Brenning et al. (2017) found that mothers' overprotective parenting was explained by fathers' separation anxiety, above and beyond mothers' own separation anxiety (albeit only marginally). These studies show inconsistent results and generally focus on parents' characteristics (e.g., depression, attachment). To our best knowledge, no research has been conducted to examine the relation between parents' threat perceptions and overprotection, thereby considering both actor and partner effects. This is relevant, however, as such beliefs about threat and danger may be coconstructed and fueled within the family system (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004). As beliefs about the world are often discussed within the parental subsystem, they may potentially shape not only one's own but also the partner's parenting (Zimmermann et al., 2022).

First, based on the works of Gurland and Grolnick (2024) and Robichaud et al. (2020), showing that greater perceived threat predicted more controlling parenting, we hypothesized that a direct effect of threat beliefs on overprotection (i.e., an actor effect) could be observed in both parents.

Second, drawing upon the systemic transactional model of dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 2005), which indicates that partners' stress experiences, coping, and associated outcomes are interdependent, we expected a mutual influence of mothers' and fathers' threat perception on their partner's overprotection. Dyadic coping encompasses the processes partners use to cope with stressors, including individual strategies to assist the other partner to cope with stress, as well as collaborative strategies to manage the stressful situation together (Falconier et al., 2015). Threat beliefs about the world may be experienced as stressful by each parent, prompting them to implement coping strategies both individually and together with their partner. These strategies might include, for example, conversations about each partner's emotions regarding their perceptions of the world (emotion-focused coping) or practical ways to resolve risks for their children (problem-focused coping). The latter can fuel overprotective parenting practices through premature problem-solving or infantilization of their children. Such overprotection has been described in the relationship-focused coping model (Coyne & Smith, 1991) among partners who underestimate each other's capabilities and provide unnecessary emotional or practical support. By extension, this strategy may also apply to parenting practices, as parents coping with the stress they perceive in their partner in reaction to societal perceived threats may become overprotective of their child. Therefore, we expected that one partner's threat beliefs would be associated with the other partner's overprotective parenting behavior (i.e., partner effect).

Parental anxiety and mindfulness as moderating factors

We not only aimed to examine whether parents' threat beliefs are related to overprotective parenting, but we also wanted to test whether specific individual-level factors explain why some parents may be more or less sensitive for cues of threat. A considerable body of research demonstrated that parental anxiety is a risk factor for overprotection. Indeed, it has been found that anxious parents are more likely to implement inappropriate levels of directiveness, problem-solving, involvement, or monitoring of their children (Segrin et al., 2013). There is a theoretical and empirical consensus that anxiety is associated with biases in attention to threat-related information, through both unconscious and conscious processes (Bar-Haim et al., 2010). In the case of parents, anxiety may increase their sensitivity to threat cues when the world is perceived as threatening for their children. Such anxious parents may have the tendency to automatically evaluate benign or slightly threatening stimuli as highly threatening, hence allocating resources to stimuli evaluated as mildly threatening and acting upon these threatening perceptions—even when the context, their prior learning, and their available coping resources may indicate the contrary. High level of anxiety may activate approach-related states to protect their children from threats, thereby responding to such cues with an increased risk of overprotection (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005). Herein, we aimed to examine whether parental anxiety also may play a moderating role in this association between perceived threat and overprotective parenting.

Further, we also aimed to examine whether parental mindfulness played a moderating role in the association between perceived threat and overprotection. Mindfulness has been previously described as a resource for parents in relation to stress (Burke et al., 2020). It is defined as a trait awareness and attention to inner experiences, nonreactivity to such experiences (i.e., ability to notice feelings or thoughts and not immediately react to them), and nonjudgment of these experiences (Corthorn & Milicic, 2016). There is abundant research illustrating the beneficial effects of mindfulness for mental and physical health as well as relationship functioning (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2010). Moreover, mindfulness-based interventions have been used in many parenting programs to support parents in reducing parental stress and increasing efficacy when facing such stressors (Burke et al., 2020). As mindful individuals are less vulnerable to cognitive distortions and automatic judgments (e.g., Brown et al., 2007), we expected that mindful parents may be less sensitive to threat cues and may be less likely to respond through overprotection to shield their adolescents from danger. Therefore, we expected that mindfulness would moderate the relation between threat beliefs and overprotection.

Further, we also aimed to examine partner effects for both anxiety and mindfulness, as well as potential moderating partner effects. Because prior empirical evidence is still currently missing, our approach is exploratory. Yet, according to the models of dyadic coping of stress detailed earlier, it could be expected that parents who are more anxious or are less mindful may be more sensitive to their partner's perceived threat and respond to this stress through a higher level of overprotection.

Current study

The overall goal of this study was to better understand why some parents engage in overprotective parenting in their adolescents' upbringing. A first research goal involved examining the association between parents' threat beliefs and overprotective parenting, where we expected that both mothers and fathers who believe the world to be threatening would be more overprotective than parents who do not have such threat beliefs. We expected both actor and partner effects of threat beliefs on overprotective parenting for both mothers and fathers. The second goal was to examine the potentially moderating role of parental anxiety and mindfulness

in the association between parents' threat beliefs and overprotection. Thereby, we hypothesized that the relation between threat beliefs and overprotective parenting would be particularly pronounced when parents reported high levels of anxiety, whereas a higher level of mindfulness was expected to dampen the association between threat beliefs and overprotective parenting. Sensitivity analyses were done to examine potential differences according to the marital status of parents (i.e., married versus separated, divorced, single, or widowed).

The present study took place in the specific sociocultural context of Switzerland, a small country located in the heart of Europe that is recognized as one of the most competitive economies globally and consistently reports one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe (Swiss Confederation, [n.d.](#)). Although Switzerland is generally characterized by a strong emphasis on individual autonomy, it simultaneously upholds high expectations for achievement and success, as reflected in the Hofstede Insights framework (Norgesklubben, [2018](#)).

With regard to family life, Switzerland retains a relatively traditional approach. In fact, traditional family structures remain strongly prevalent: Most couples with children under the age of 25 are married, and mothers continue to assume primary responsibility for household and childcare duties (Federal Statistical Office, [2021](#)). Regarding the state-funded Swiss school system (compulsory education of 11 years; starting age 4), it presents a paradoxical character: on the one hand, it is integrative with very few people ending up with only a compulsory degree of education, but on the other hand, it is also highly selective, with a large proportion of teenagers oriented toward vocational tracks at the secondary level (Le Goff et al., [2024](#)). In such a context, many parents experience significant pressure, as they wish to ensure their children's success within a highly competitive environment and may be inclined to become overly involved in school matters (Van Petegem et al., [2025](#)).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 320 parents of adolescents participated in the study. For 147 adolescents, both mother and father participated, whereas for 136 adolescents only their mother participated and for 37 adolescents only fathers participated. The majority of the parents reported being married or living together (69.5% and 75.5% for mothers and fathers, respectively), whereas 24.1% and 20.7% reported being divorced or separated, respectively; 5.3% and 3.3% reported being single, respectively; and 1.1% and 0.5% reported being widowed, respectively. The large majority were biological mothers (99.3%) and fathers (97.3%). As for their educational level, obligatory schooling was reported for 15.1% and 12.1% of mothers and fathers, respectively; vocational education for 33.0% and 29.8%, respectively; secondary education for 8.6% and 8.3%, respectively; university for 31.5% and 29.8%, respectively; and other type of education (e.g., federal certificate) for 11.8% and 14.4%, respectively. Most parents reported being employed (87.6% of mothers and 89.9% of fathers). There was a large variety in the annual gross household income. The median gross household income ranged from CHF 103,000 to 122,000, which is in line with the median household income of families with children in this area. Only 9% of parents reported an income below 49,000 and 9.7% an income over 190,000. Parents filled out questionnaires with respect to their adolescent in their last year of obligatory schooling. These adolescents were, on average, 14.78 years of age ($SD = .72$), 53.7% were girls, and most adolescents followed a vocational education (29.7%) or a general education (67.0%).

Procedure

Our study, based on a cross-sectional design, was conducted between February 2019 and November 2019 in a French speaking part of Switzerland, in medium-sized cities and suburbs,

and among parents of adolescents in their last year of obligatory schooling. After obtaining approval from the School and Youth department of the Canton de Vaud, data were collected in eight public state schools that agreed to participate. During a class period, research assistants explained the purpose of the study and distributed envelopes among students that contained two questionnaires, informed consents, and prestamped envelopes. Students were invited to deliver the questionnaires to their parents (or to the two persons they considered as most involved in their education). In the informed consent, we explained the voluntary nature of participation and the anonymous treatment of the data. Parents were invited to complete the questionnaires separately and to send the questionnaire and informed consent back in separate envelopes within 3 weeks. The questionnaires had a unique, random code, which allowed us to link the data of the parents of the same adolescent. Participating parents were each offered a financial reward. The study complied with the ethical standards of the Swiss Society of Psychology and was approved by the coordinating committee for educational research of the Canton de Vaud.

Most of the missing data were related to the nonparticipation of one of the two parents. Little's (1988) missing completely at random test was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(46) = 60.90, p = .07$, indicating that data were missing at random. Although we report analyses using listwise deletion, we also conducted analyses using full information maximum likelihood that found similar outcomes.

Measures

Participants completed French versions of the questionnaires, which were either validated in previous research or translated following the recommendations of the International Test Commission (i.e., through a back-translation procedure; Hambleton, 2001). All items were rated on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*).

Overprotective parenting

Parental overprotection was assessed using the anxious overprotection subscale of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (MOPS; Chevrier et al., 2023). This subscale assesses five components of overprotective parenting (premature problem-solving, anxious rearing, privacy invasion, infantilization, and general overprotection). Each component is measured through five items, yielding a total of 25 items ("I try to solve all of the problems of my son/daughter without him/her having to do anything"). A mean score was calculated across all 25 items. As in previous research (Brenning et al., 2017), the total scale had a good reliability ($\alpha = .89$ for mothers, $\alpha = .89$ for fathers).

Threat beliefs

We assessed parents' threat beliefs using 10 items of the World Out There questionnaire (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005), which was developed to assess parents' perceptions of threat in their children's current and future environment in terms of scarcity of resources and instability. A sample item reads "It makes me nervous to think about all the dangers kids are exposed to today." As in previous research (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024), the scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .85$ for mothers, $\alpha = .82$ for fathers).

Anxiety

Parents further reported upon their symptoms of anxiety using a six-item version of the state anxiety subscale of the Spielberger State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Marteau & Bekker, 1992). This shortened version of the STAI is often used and is well validated, containing both anxiety present items (e.g., “I feel worried”) and anxiety absent items (e.g., “I feel calm,” reverse coded). As in previous studies (Chevrier et al., 2023), the scale had a good reliability ($\alpha = .83$ for mothers, $\alpha = .79$ for fathers).

Mindfulness

We assessed mindfulness using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003), frequently used for measuring present-moment awareness and attention in daily life. The scale is composed of 15 items (e.g., “I rush through activities without being really attentive to them,” reverse coded). The scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .87$ for mothers, $\alpha = .87$ for fathers), as in previous research (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Data analysis

The preliminary analyses involved testing mean-level differences between mothers and fathers on overprotective parenting, threat beliefs, anxiety, and mindfulness. This was done through multilevel modeling to account for the interdependence in the data, with parents (Level 1) being nested within dyads (Level 2), thereby making use of a generalized least squares (GLS) framework (Kenny & Kashy, 2011). We performed four separate regression analyses (one for each dependent variable), with parents’ gender as a Level 1 predictor. Then, we also examined differences between the sample of married and cohabiting parents with the sample of single, separated, and widowed parents. This was done through a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with marital status as an independent variable and our variables of interest as dependent variables.

The first research question focused on the relation between mothers’ and fathers’ threat beliefs and their overprotective parenting, testing for both actor and partner effects. This was done using actor–partner interdependence modeling (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010), within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework. Thereby, we first estimated a model, with actor and partner effects freely estimated, and then estimated a constrained model, where actor effects were constrained to be equal, and partner effects were constrained to be equal. We then compared whether the constrained model fit the data equally well, and we retained the most parsimonious model representing the mutual relations between parents’ threat beliefs and their overprotective parenting (Model 1). Then, in two separate models, we added to Model 1 parental anxiety and parental mindfulness as predictors of overprotective parenting. Specifically, Model 2a involved adding both actor and partner effects of anxiety on overprotective parenting, whereas Model 2b involved adding the actor and partner effects of mindfulness. The same procedure was used to identify the most parsimonious models, that is, we compared a model where actor and partner effects were freely estimated with a constrained model, and we retained the most parsimonious model that fit the data well.

In a final step, we examined the potentially moderating role of anxiety (Model 3a) and mindfulness (Model 3b) in the actor and partner associations between parents’ threat beliefs and overprotective parenting. This was done through the approach described by Garcia et al. (2015) for testing moderation within an APIM framework. Specifically, we first centered all independent variables and calculated interaction terms between all independent variables,

yielding four interaction terms per model. For instance, Model 3a involved adding the following interaction terms: Maternal Anxiety \times Maternal Threat Beliefs, Maternal Anxiety \times Paternal Threat Beliefs, Paternal Anxiety \times Maternal Threat Beliefs, and Paternal Anxiety \times Paternal Threat Beliefs. Significant interactions were plotted out at high (+1 *SD*) and low (−1 *SD*) levels of the independent variables. All analyses were conducted using R (Version 4.2.2; R Core Team, 2022). We used robust maximum likelihood estimation to deal with nonnormality observed in some of our variables (Finney & DiStefano, 2006).

In a series of sensitivity analyses, we examined the potentially moderating role of marital status in each of the above structural models. This was done through multigroup analyses, comparing a freely estimated model (structural relations were allowed to vary across groups) with a constrained model (structural relations were constrained to be equal across groups). A significant difference using χ^2 in model fit would indicate that marital status plays a moderating role.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Supplemental Table S1. The multilevel analyses, which tested mean-level differences between mothers and fathers, indicated that mothers reported higher levels of overprotection, $t(463) = -2.24$, $p = .03$; anxiety, $t(463) = -4.73$, $p < .001$, and a lower level of mindfulness, $t(464) = 2.76$, $p = .006$, as compared to fathers. The difference for threat beliefs was not statistically significant, $t(463) = -1.38$, $p = .17$. The MANOVA examining mean-level differences in marital status was not significant, $F(1,318) = 1.48$, $p = .16$.

Main analyses

We first estimated the mutual relations between mothers' and fathers' threat beliefs and their overprotection, using APIM (Model 1). We found evidence of both actor and partner effects for mothers and fathers, with medium to large effect sizes according to the guidelines of Gignac and Szodorai (2016). Specifically, stronger threat beliefs predicted more overprotection among mothers and fathers. In addition, above and beyond these actor effects, it was found that mothers' threat beliefs predicted more overprotection among fathers, and vice versa. Then, we examined whether a constrained model, where actor effects and partner effects were constrained, fit the data equally well. The difference between the freely estimated model and the constrained model was not statistically significant, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = .16$, $p = .92$, indicating that these associations are not statistically significantly different for mothers versus fathers. This constrained model fit the data well (comparative fit index [CFI] = 1.00, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .00, standardized root-mean-square residual [SRMR] = .01) and is presented in Figure 1.

In a next step, we added mothers' and fathers' anxiety as a predictor of overprotection to this model (Model 2a). We found evidence for actor effects across mothers and fathers, where higher levels of anxiety predicted more overprotection for both mothers and fathers, with medium effect size. We did not find evidence for partner effects. Further, a constrained model fit the data equally well, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.97$, $p = .23$; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .03 (see Figure 2). Then, we tested for the mutual relations between mothers' and fathers' mindfulness and overprotection (Model 2b). Similar to Model 2a, we found evidence for actor effects but not for partner effects. Specifically, higher levels of mindfulness were associated with less

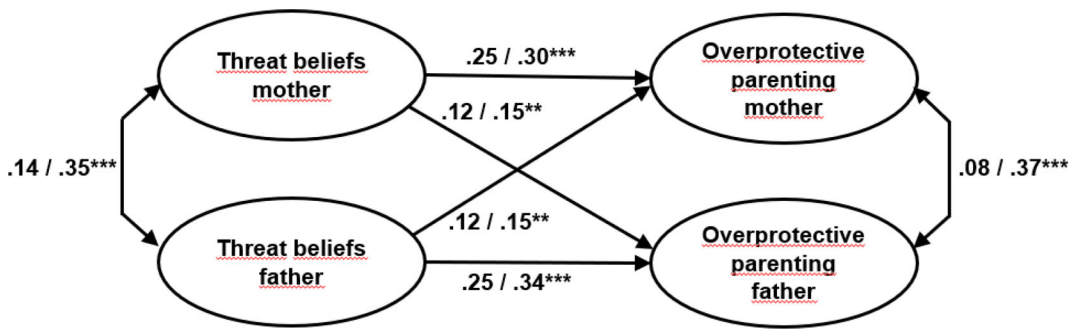


FIGURE 1 Actor-partner interdependence model depicting the relation between parents' threat beliefs and overprotective parenting (Model 1), using listwise deletion *Note.* The first coefficient is the unstandardized coefficient, the second is the standardized coefficient. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

overprotection across both mothers and fathers. The constrained model fit the data equally well, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = .64$, $p = .73$; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .02 (see Figure 2).

Finally, we examined whether parental anxiety (Model 3a) and parental mindfulness (Model 3b) moderated the relation between threat beliefs and overprotection, using a moderated APIM framework (Garcia et al., 2015). We found evidence for one interaction effect for anxiety, with a medium effect size (see Table 1 for interaction estimates). Specifically, maternal anxiety moderated the relation between maternal threat beliefs and maternal overprotection. As can be seen in Figure 3, maternal threat beliefs were related to overprotection only at low levels of maternal anxiety. At high levels of anxiety, mothers reported high levels of overprotection, irrespective of their threat beliefs. No other interaction effects were found for anxiety. We did not find evidence for any interaction effects of mindfulness.

Supplementary analyses

As a final step, we performed a series of sensitivity analyses that aimed to examine the potentially moderating role of marital status. The multigroup analyses yielded no evidence for a moderating role of marital status in the relations between threat beliefs and overprotective parenting (Model 1), $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 4.74$, $p = .32$, nor in the models where we added anxiety (Model 2a), $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 4.25$, $p = .37$, or mindfulness (Model 2b), $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 1.29$, $p = .86$. In addition, we did not find evidence for moderation by marital status in the moderated APIMs for anxiety (Model 3a), $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 6.50$, $p = .59$, or mindfulness (Model 3b), $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 1.55$, $p = .99$. Overall, the findings indicate that our results are not significantly different for dyads where parents are married or cohabiting compared to dyads where parents are single, separated, or widowed.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the association between parents' threat beliefs and overprotective parenting. Understanding how threat beliefs relate to how children are raised has gained a growing interest among psychological and sociological researchers. In the last decades, postmodern Western societies have been described as increasingly preoccupied by threats (see Beck, 1992). Also designated as cindynisation, derived from the Greek term Kindynos for "danger" (Lianos & Douglas, 2001), we observed this socially acquired tendency to analyze and constantly scrutinize the environment for potential irregularities or risks that may or may not be

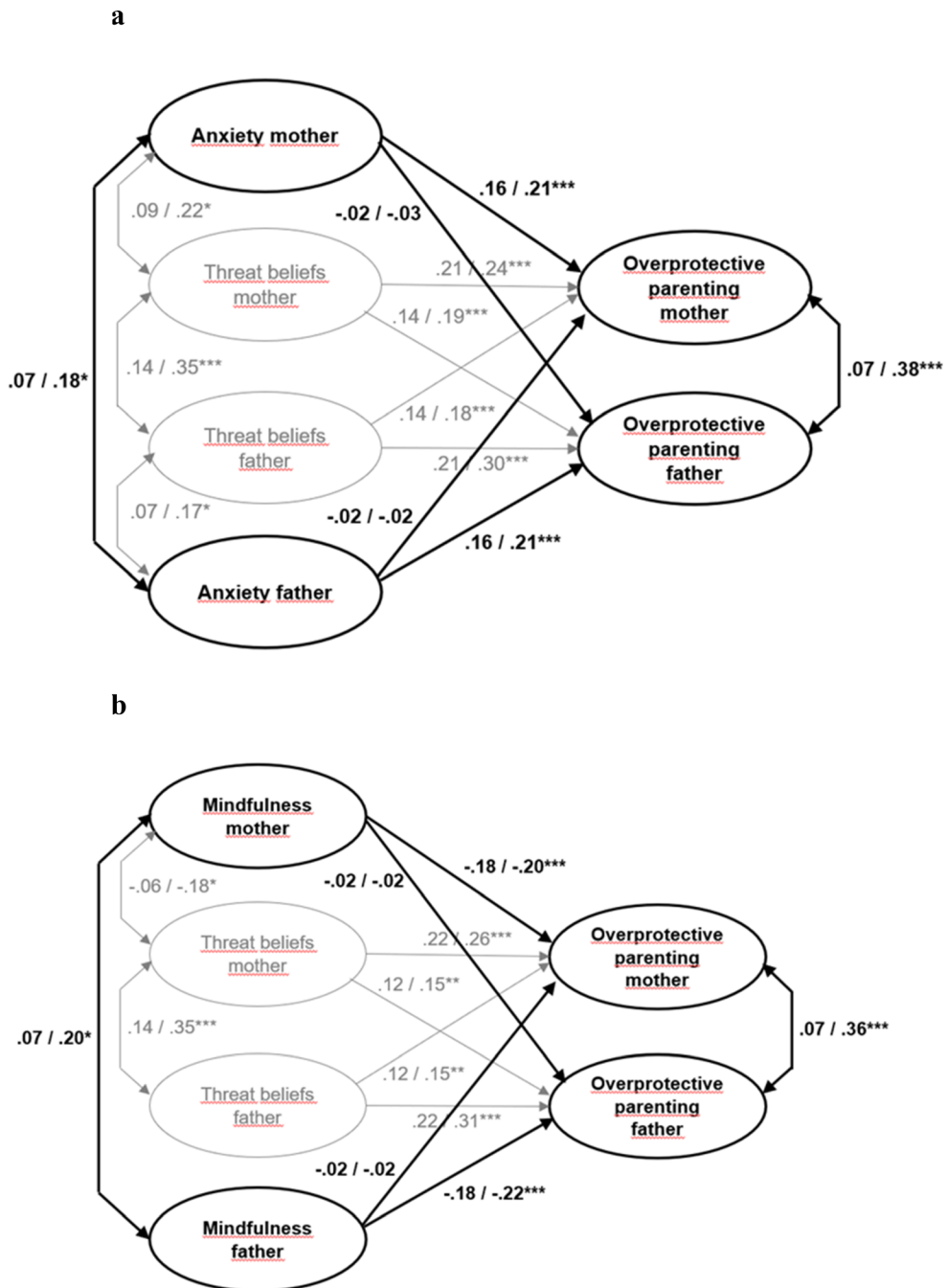


FIGURE 2 Actor-partner interdependence model depicting the relation between parental anxiety and overprotective parenting (Fig. 2a, Model 2a) and the relation between parental mindfulness and overprotective parenting (Fig. 2b, Model 2b), using listwise deletion *Note*. The first coefficient is the unstandardized coefficient, the second is the standardized coefficient. For the sake of clarity, nonsignificant relations between endogenous variables are not presented. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

accurate. Parents would integrate this tendency in keeping their children away from these perceived threats, even at the price of excessive protection that may hamper children's development (Furedi, 2008). In the United States for instance, unsupervised activities, described as a healthy

TABLE 1 Parameter estimates for the interaction between anxiety and threat beliefs (Model 3a) and mindfulness and threat beliefs (Model 3b), using listwise deletion.

	Model 3a: Threat Beliefs × Anxiety					
	Maternal overprotection			Paternal overprotection		
	Unstand.	Stand.	<i>p</i>	Unstand.	Stand.	<i>p</i>
Threat M × Anxiety M	−.28	−.24	.004	−.08	−.07	.40
Threat F × Anxiety M	.09	.07	.38	.09	.09	.34
Threat M × Anxiety F	.08	.05	.57	.04	.03	.70
Threat F × Anxiety F	.11	.08	.36	.17	.15	.07

	Model 3b: Threat Beliefs × Mindfulness					
	Maternal overprotection			Paternal overprotection		
	Unstand.	Stand.	<i>p</i>	Unstand.	Stand.	<i>p</i>
Threat M × Mindfulness M	.08	.05	.53	.04	.03	.68
Threat F × Mindfulness M	−.13	−.09	.25	−.02	−.01	.84
Threat M × Mindfulness F	−.15	−.10	.27	−.04	−.03	.62
Threat F × Mindfulness F	.06	.05	.47	−.01	−.01	.94

Note. F = father; M = mother.

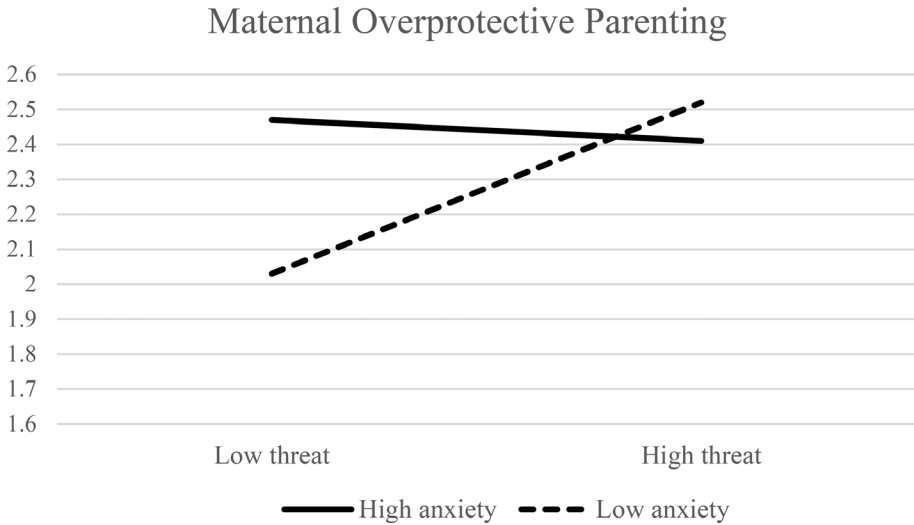


FIGURE 3 Interaction between maternal threat beliefs and maternal anxiety in predicting maternal overprotective parenting.

part of development in developmental psychology, are increasingly considered unsafe and putting parents at risk of neglect charges (Flynn et al. 2023).

In response to such threat perception and socially prescribed protection expectations addressed to parents (Lee et al., 2014), the continuous supervision and overprotection of adolescents might be perceived as socially desirable and necessary. As framed by Reiss & Oliveri (1980), when families interpret the world as unsafe or unstable, overprotection may become not merely excessive concern but the enactment of a family paradigm built on a worldview shaped by fear, scarcity, or insecurity and becomes a family coping strategy to face such threats.

In line with this, results of this study indicate that threat beliefs of both mothers and fathers are positively associated with overprotective parenting. The more parents reported feeling worried and believing that the world in which their children live is unstable and characterized by scarcity of resources, the more they tended to overprotect their adolescent. Therefore, both mothers and fathers were found to influence each other in their overprotection, as partner effects of threat beliefs on overprotective parenting were identified for both mothers and fathers, thus expanding previous research of Robichaud et al. (2020) and Gurland and Grolnick (2024).

The partner effects, in particular, indicate that the relation between parents' perceived threat and overprotection should be understood within a family systems perspective. As parents of adolescents often live together for a long time while jointly raising their children, they likely discuss and coconstruct their worldviews, which may have a spillover effect on each partner's parenting (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018). By discussing and sharing their fears, they may elicit overprotective parenting practices in their partner, who may respond to these concerns by becoming increasingly overprotective to cope with stress related to threat perception. These findings echo the results of Rousseau and Scharf (2018), who found evidence for partner effects of parents' prevention focus on overprotective parenting, though only among fathers. Specifically, mothers who had a strong prevention focus (i.e., an orientation toward security, safety, and compliance with perceived obligations) were more likely to overprotect their young adult children, an effect that also spilled over into fathers' child-rearing. In other words, it seems that parents who are strongly concerned with safety not only overprotect their child themselves, but highly prevention-focused mothers also seem to push fathers toward overprotective behavior with the aim of preventing their children from negative future outcomes. Moreover, our study found partner effects for both mothers and fathers, conversely to Rousseau and Scharf (2018) who found partner effects for fathers only in their study based on an Israeli sample. Our results suggest that fathers' threat perceptions, in addition to mothers' perceptions, play an important role in family processes, both directly in predicting their own overprotection and also indirectly on mothers' overprotection, providing support for evidence of dyadic coping strategies within the parental dyad in the context of perceived threat for their children's future. This variation between studies could be explained by the differences in the sociocultural and geopolitical context. As widely documented by scholars, the cultural context influences parental perceptions of threat and societal expectations about appropriate parenting (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006). More generally, this confirms the need to take into consideration fathers' and not only mothers' perspectives on overprotection and to further investigate potential gender differences in overprotection (Arslan et al., 2023).

Further, parental anxiety and mindfulness were found to be uniquely associated with overprotection across mothers and fathers. When parents were anxious, they exhibited more overprotection, whereas when they were highly mindful, they reported less overprotection. Although this study confirmed the role of parental anxiety in overprotection, it was the first study to our knowledge showing that mindfulness may play a role. Yet, contrarily to our expectations, mindfulness did not moderate the association between parental threat beliefs and overprotection. Nevertheless, we did find a direct negative association between mindfulness and overprotection, indicating that when parents are more nonjudgmental and connected to their inner experiences, they are less likely to engage in overprotection. From a systemic lens, mindfulness may serve as a family paradigm characterized by present-moment awareness, emotional regulation, and flexible, responsive caregiving. It could function as a counter paradigm to threat-based parenting, offering an alternative framework for meaning making and action.

As for parental anxiety, in addition to consistently finding direct relations between parental anxiety and overprotection, we found that maternal anxiety did interact with threat beliefs in their relation to overprotection but not in the expected direction. In fact, we only found evidence for a link between maternal threat beliefs and overprotection when their level of anxiety

was low. These results echo the findings of Ekinçi and Van Lange (2023), who found that participants particularly low in trait anxiety were particularly sensitive to induced COVID-19 threat. In line with Jonas et al.' (2014) research, threat perception would increase the activation of approach-oriented actions—such as overprotection—when anxiety is at a low level to maintain anxiety at a bearable level. Overprotection then would fulfill a relief function, but only when anxiety is not already at a high level; however, more research would be needed to test this explicitly.

Implications

Considering its effect on mental health during adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Van Petegem et al., 2022), overprotective parenting should be prevented. Our results shed light on some of the potential determinants of overprotective parenting, which could be targeted by practitioners. For instance, they could explore with parents their threat beliefs and worries about their children's future beyond general anxiety. In parenting education programs, clinicians could support parents in sharing their threat beliefs in view of normalizing and de-emphasizing anxious feelings to reduce the risk that parents use overprotection as an automatic and unconscious response. Future research could also target clinical populations to examine whether the findings generalize to such populations.

Although mindfulness did not moderate the relation between threat beliefs and overprotection, it significantly predicted lower levels of overprotection and therefore may be a relevant target in clinical practice. As suggested by Duncan et al. (2009), parents could be trained to enhance their abilities to listen with full attention to their adolescents during moment-to-moment interactions and adopt a nonjudgmental, compassionate attitude toward themselves and their child in order to build awareness and regulate their own emotional states (i.e., anxiety) and their child's. Encouraging parents to examine and revise their underlying threat beliefs aligns with strategies for second-order change and transformations that go beyond behavior to restructure the meaning systems that guide family life (Reiss & Oliveri, 1980). Mindfulness could be one such tool, helping families reflect on and move beyond culturally reinforced threat narratives. Because theory and research suggest that paradigm change is difficult, insights from this study could offer meaningful inroads into understanding how such shifts might occur or be supported in practice.

Further, our results indicate that these issues should be tackled not only on an individual basis but also in a family system setting to take into consideration the other parent's perspective and fears, considering that parents influence each other and act as coparents (McHale & Lindhal, 2011). Practitioners could, in coparenting or couple therapy sessions for instance, help parents identify their own threat beliefs and how such beliefs are discussed and potentially exacerbated within the coparental relationship. They could reinforce positive dyadic coping to prevent potential spillover effects. By doing so, parents may come to understand how their threat beliefs and their interactions with the other parent may play a role in their parenting practices (Van Petegem et al., 2022).

Limitations and future research

Despite its strengths, this study contains several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions regarding directionality between overprotection, threat beliefs, anxiety, and mindfulness. Adolescents' anxiety may predict negative worldviews that would in turn predict overprotective parenting (Boele et al., 2023). Moreover, overprotection could bias parents' worldviews in a negative way. Overprotective parents may not have the opportunity to

experience other worldviews and be influenced by a process of self-fulfilling prophecy, similar to negative cognitive bias observed in depression.

Second, data were collected in a high-income, Western country among educated, middle-class, heterosexual parents, limiting the generalization of the results. Future research should consider more diverse families, investigate the relation between overprotection and threat beliefs in other cultural contexts, and examine whether there are cultural differences in the interpretation of overprotection (e.g., some parenting practices could be considered overprotective in one context, but considered appropriate in another). Third, threat beliefs, anxiety, mindfulness, and overprotection were self-reported by parents, which is the usual way to assess such cognitions (Chevrier et al., 2023).

Future studies could look at partner's perceptions of threat beliefs or anxiety and provide more insight on partner dynamics. Fourth, data were collected before the COVID-19 crisis that affected families and adolescents in particular (Weeland et al., 2021). Parental beliefs about the world as an insecure and unpredictable place may have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis as well as by other major crises that took place since then (see Morin, 1999, for the concept of polycrisis). One could expect that parents' concerns about the effects of such crises on youths' mental health and future are accurate, as documented by research on climate anxiety (Hickman et al., 2021; Zimmermann et al., 2024). For these reasons, further research on parental threat beliefs, using a family system perspective that examines both mothering and fathering, may become increasingly necessary to inform parenting research and clinical practice. In sum, this study provides insight into the role that parents' threat beliefs play in overprotective parenting. It underlines the importance of considering broader family dynamics by taking into account both mothers' and fathers' cognitions about the world in which their children live, and their anxiety and mindfulness, to better understand and prevent overprotective parenting.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data may be made available upon request to the authors.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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