

Exploring situational fears of children and adolescents

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■ **ABSTRACT :** Fear are the most common problem related to sensitivity in children. Many children experience the fear of a particular thing or a particular situation at some point in their development. The change in the fears of children and adolescents with increasing age is expressed by cognitive and social development. The situational fears may not be serious if it occurs occasionally. In a case where the child fails to secure parental support, the situation fear may develop to the point where the child is seriously hampered in social relationships, developing a fear of the unfamiliar that can remain for many years. With this background and the current reality of children being more fearful than the past, this study attempted to evaluate the reliability of situational fear producing factors among children of 4-14 years. The gender and age specific differences were also explored. The present study was conducted among 200 school going children of age 4-14 years, in Coimbatore district through k in 10 sampling technique with certain inclusion criteria. The investigator used five-point rating scale to secure adequate data on situational fears. 't' test statistic was done to appraise the gender specific and age specific differences. The selected three age groups were found to have situational fears at varying degrees. However, the number of significant variations on gender and age was very few, which projects that these variables do not influence the situational fears of children between 4-14 years. An elaborate study has to be undertaken to find out what causes certain other fears to increase in its intensity with increase in age as well the variation in gender.

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Fears are the most common problem related to sensitivity in children. Many children experience the fear of a particular thing or a particular situation at some point in their development. Certain fears can even be considered as normal aspects of development (Manassis, 2008). However, some children seem to be fearful of almost any new experience. These children require special parenting approaches as they need to prepare themselves to face new experiences.

Giving a positive message of confidence to these more inhibited children can make a difference for their adjustment to new experiences (Sylvia, 2007).

During the middle and late childhood stages fear and anxiety goes together. Situational stress become a primary concern causing fear during this period. Not knowing how to act in a new situation, many of these children are easily frightened by exposure to strange people, places and objects. Shyness and restoring

normalcy are common responses. This may not be serious if it occurs occasionally, as child may seek support and encouragement from the parents to tide over such situations. In a case where the child fails to secure parental support, the shyness may develop to the point where the child is seriously hampered in social relationships, developing a fear of the unfamiliar that can remain for many years.

In view with this background and the current reality of children being more fearful than the past, this study attempted to evaluate the reliability of situational fear producing factors among children of 4-14 years. The gender and age specific differences were also explored to match the cures to the causes of fear in them. The major objective were.

- To analyse the gender specific differences in the intensity of situational fear among the selected children.
- To assess the age specific differences in the intensity of situational fear among the selected children.

Hypothesis :

The hypotheses framed for the study were:

H 1 : There is no marked gender specific differences in the intensity of the identified situational fear.

H 2 : There is no marked age specific differences in the intensity of the identified situational fear.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The present study followed a survey research design on exploring fear factors among children. As this study demands school going children from the age 4-14 years, multi stage sampling technique with certain inclusion criteria were formulated to pick up three schools of Coimbatore as the area of study.

After finalizing the schools from where the data were to be procured, secondary data of the student enrolment was obtained. It was found that every class namely lower kindergarten to 9th standard had two sections each with thirty-five students approximately. Hence, the investigator adopted k in 10 sampling technique in each class and zeroed in for about 200 children from selected schools.

With an elaborate review and with the suggestions of the subject experts seven common situations that provoked fear in them were identified namely fear of

going to school/school refusal, fear of sudden shocking incident, fear of new situation, fear of night time/bedtime, fear of death and injury, social fear, and fear of natural disasters. A five-point fear inventory on these situations was constructed with seven statements under each. With pilot study, content and phase validity the inventory was finalized and found to be moderately reliable to procure adequate data from children of 4-14 years. 't' test was carried out to adjudge the age and gender specific differences.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study as well as relevant discussion have been presented under following heads :

Gender specific differences on fear of situational fears :

The Table 1 projects the distribution of the selected respondents within the identified fear of situations/ events and its descriptive statistics of 't' value depicting the gender specific differences among the three age groups namely pre-school, elementary school, and high school children.

The Table 1 distinctly brings out the difference in mean scores among boys and girls of the selected three groups of children namely pre, elementary and high school. Carefully analysing the mean value, it was observed that the mean score of boys and girls procured among elementary school children on fear of school/ school refusal and fear of sudden shocking incident showed variation. Among the pre-schoolers gender variations were observed with the fear of new situation and fear of night time /bed time only. However, the high school children exhibited gender differences in the fear of natural disasters.

The 't' value further authenticated that certain situational fears do not have gender variations among the identified age groups. Drilling further into the table, girls at the pre-school and elementary school level exhibited more fear when compared to boys but the fear of natural disasters was more among high school boys than their counterparts. This finding is in consistent with Gullone and King (1993), who found that for certain fears namely the fear of death and danger, fear of school refusal and fear of unknown the female children reported higher levels of fear than male children. However, the other fears factors of other age groups were not reported to have gender specific differences.

On the whole, the number of significant variations on gender among the three age groups were only few, and thus gender do not influence the situational fears. Hence the hypothesis numbered H₁ stands accepted.

respondents being grouped in relation to their age on situational fears and its descriptive statistics of 't' value was carried out to find out the variation.

The present finding lucidly projects out the mean scores among the three age groups of children as a whole as between 11-26. However, looking into the significance aspect most of the non-significant variations were

Age specific differences on fears of situational fears:

The Table 2 presents the mean score of the

Table 1: Gender specific differences on fear of situational fears

Aspects	Pre-school				Elementary school				High- school			
	Boys (29)		Girls (31)		Boys (33)		Girls (37)		Boys (43)		Girls (27)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fear of going to school	19.48	6.20	18.16	6.59	14.52	4.16	16.92	4.63	17.84	5.57	18.63	4.90
			't' value - 0.799 ^{NS}				't' value - 2.274*				't' value - 0.606 ^{NS}	
Fear on sudden shocking incident	22.93	5.63	23.58	7.47	17.27	5.42	19.86	5.37	20.67	5.98	20.96	6.38
			't' value - 0.378 ^{NS}				't' value - 2.007*				't' value - 0.192 ^{NS}	
Fear of new situation	16.62	6.52	20.32	6.46	10.94	3.16	12.95	5.15	13.14	3.44	13.41	3.25
			't' value - 2.209*				't' value - 1.935 ^{NS}				't' value - 0.324 ^{NS}	
Fear of night time/ bedtime	18.62	5.75	21.81	6.16	16.18	6.29	18.59	6.37	16.09	5.96	17.70	5.78
			't' value - 2.067*				't' value - 1.590 ^{NS}				't' value - 1.114 ^{NS}	
Fear of death and injury	21.59	5.17	19.42	6.54	22.03	6.60	22.95	6.56	21.21	4.91	22.41	3.47
			't' value - 1.418 ^{NS}				't' value - 0.582 ^{NS}				't' value - 1.106 ^{NS}	
Social fear	17.28	7.70	20.06	6.46	12.76	5.27	13.27	6.87	12.19	2.91	11.07	2.99
			't' value - 1.523 ^{NS}				't' value - 0.362 ^{NS}				't' value - 1.542 ^{NS}	
Fear of natural disasters	26.03	7.64	26.52	7.36	26.12	5.98	25.14	5.22	26.88	4.25	24.70	3.50
			't' value - 0.249 ^{NS}				't' value - .737 ^{NS}				't' value - 2.232*	

* indicates significance of value at P=0.05 NS=Non-significant

Table 2 : Age specific differences on fear of situational fears

Aspects	Pre-school			Elementary school			High school		
	No	Mean	SD	No	Mean	SD	No	Mean	SD
School refusal	60	18.80	6.38	70	15.79	4.55	70	18.14	5.30
't' value				3.128**			2.815**		
Sudden shocking incident	60	23.27	6.60	70	18.64	5.51	70	20.79	6.09
't' value				4.359**			2.19*		
New situation	60	18.53	6.70	70	12.00	4.42	70	13.24	3.35
't' value				6.642**			1.871 ^{NS}		
Night time	60	20.27	6.13	70	17.46	6.41	70	16.71	5.90
't' value				2.542*			0.72 ^{NS}		
Death and injury	60	20.47	5.96	70	22.51	6.54	70	21.67	4.42
't' value				1.847 ^{NS}			0.89 ^{NS}		
Social fear	60	18.72	7.17	70	13.03	5.87	70	11.76	2.97
't' value				4.974**			1.615 ^{NS}		
Natural disasters	60	26.28	7.44	70	25.60	5.57	70	26.04	4.09
't' value				0.595 ^{NS}			0.533 ^{NS}		

* and ** indicate significance of values at P=0.05 and 0.01, respectively NS=Non-significant

observed among the elementary and high school children.

The data relevant to the fear of death and injury and fear of natural disasters did not show statically significant variation among the pre and elementary schoolers as well as the elementary and high schoolers. Hence these factors of fear do not vary with age. The intensity remains more or less the same at all levels.

Looking into the first and second fear factors fears of going to school/school refusal and fear on sudden shocking incident had statistically significant 't' value among the three age group which goes without saying that age is a strong influencer of fear on these situations. Certain fear factors namely facing a new situation, fear of night time and social fear of pre and elementary schoolers were found to exhibit a tremendous change in mean score which was further authenticated by the significant 't' value. But at the same time no significant variation was noted with the other age group counterpart.

Drilling further into the mean score (the higher the score more is the fear) of the elementary schooler, it was evident that the pre-school children had an augmented mean score in all fear factors related to situations except the fear of death as these children at such a younger age had not developed the concept of death yet. The other claim of this result would be that the fear intensity subsides by increase in age. This claim was further supported by Spence (1997) who noted that the percentage of variance in anxiety symptoms explained by specific first order factors (separation anxiety, social phobia, panic/agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive, generalized anxiety and fears of physical injury) was higher in the younger compared to older school children. Moreover, the elementary school children were found to have a comparatively less mean score when compared to their counterparts in most the fears which needs further investigation.

In total hypothesis numbered H₂ stands accepted as the fear of new situations were not significantly controlled by age.

Directions for future research :

The recommendation for similar future research and

policy decisions include the following:

- Children should be encouraged to develop their confidence against the fearful conditions.
- Future studies should try to find out some coping mechanism and should try to observe how these are helpful to children to cope up with their fears in future.
- With improvement in methodology and increased resources, research can be conducted with the entire student population from various age groups both from formal as well as non-formal education system.

Conclusion :

In sum, the selected three age groups were found to have situational fears at varying degrees. However, the number of significant variations on gender and age was very few, which projects that these variables do not influence the situational fears of children between 4-14 years. However, it could be concluded that though some of the fears subsides in its intensity with increase in age, they cannot be ignored. An elaborate study has to be undertaken to find out what causes certain other fears to increase in its intensity with increase in age as well the variation in gender.

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