

Prevalence of stress during late childhood

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ABSTRACT

A generation ago, the word "stress" was reserved for adults. People think that childhood is a time when children are carefree, having no worries or responsibilities. But children also experience extreme stress, have similar symptoms as those of adults and have difficulty in handling stress. The purpose of this study was to study the prevalence and levels of stress during late childhood in relation to gender and educational standard. A total number of 192 children within the range of 6-11 years were selected randomly as sample for the study from eight different private schools from N.C. Hills district of Assam. An interview schedule was prepared to elicit background information, sources of stress and symptoms of stress exhibit by the children. The Interview schedule was constructed separately for the teachers and parents. The findings of the present study revealed that stress was prevalent during late childhood. But stress was more prevalent in the first and fifth grade compared to the other grades. Majority of the boys and girls were moderately stressed.

INTRODUCTION

The world is full of situations and events that cause stress. Stress is a part of human's life and it is unavoidable and can occur in all facets of life. It is an all-pervasive phenomenon, affecting people of all ages, genders from all walks of life and can lead to both physical and psychological health issues. It is simply a force from the inside or outside world affecting the individual. Stress is the response to the demands made upon us by the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of those demands. In small quantities, stress is good - it can motivate an individual and help to be more productive. However, excessive or prolonged stress can be harmful and can interfere with life, activities and health and can affect the way people think, act and feel. Stress

is unique and personal. It has different meanings to different people and the way of responding also differs. A situation which may be stressful for one person may be challenging for others as the same event can affect children and adults in very individual ways. It depends largely on background experiences, temperament and environmental conditions.

Stress can have positive as well as negative influences on the children. The younger the child, the greater the impact of new events, and the more powerful and potentially negative stress occurs. Some stress is a normal part of a child's everyday life and can have positive influences. However, excessive stress can have both immediate and extensive effects on children's adaptability to new situations, even events that are seemingly unrelated to the specific stressful event.

Today, the level of stress in children is rising dangerously due to pressure of academic or cultural activities. All children can cope with such a high level of expectations and parents do not seem to understand or accept that their children are under great pressure, "said Elizabeth Vadakkekara, child psychologist and director of Thran (The Hindu, 2003). Research indicates that the negative impact of stress is more profound on children who are younger than age 10 (Monk *et al.*, 2000). The beginning of late childhood is marked by the child's entrance into first grade. While adjusting to the new demands and expectations of first grade, most children are in a state of disequilibrium. Towards the end of the late childhood years, due to beginning of puberty, physical and emotional changes begin to occur which can generate stress. Keeping these facts in view, the present study has been undertaken with an objectives to study the prevalence of stress in children, to identify the levels of stress in children in relation to gender and educational standards.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Selection of samples :

Study has been conducted on 192 numbers of children within the range of 6-11 years from 8 schools. In order to derive at 192 numbers of children at first the total number of children within 6-11 years studying in eight selected schools has been found out. The number of children to be selected from each school has been calculated through probability proportion. The number of children to be selected from each of the classes has been again calculated proportionately. Finally the desired number of children from each of the classes from eight different schools has been selected randomly to arrive at a sample of 192 children. The sample consisted of equal numbers of boys and girls.

Tools and its description:

A self constructed interview schedule was used for collecting the data. The interview schedule consists of three aspects

- First part contained background information of the children
- Second part contained information on probable stress symptoms such as physiological symptoms, socio-emotional behavioural symptoms and school related symptoms.

– Third part contained statements pertaining to different sources of stress which include family related sources and school related sources.

The Interview schedule was constructed separately for teachers and parents. School related information was collected from the teachers and family related information was collected from the parents. Each statement was scored on four point scale namely – 'Very often', 'Often', 'Rarely' and 'Never'. The respondent had to give response to the most suitable option out of these four. The successive response intervals were subsequently scored 4, 3, 2, 1 and all scores were added up to obtain the total score. Higher the score more will be the stress of the child.

Procedure for data collection :

Survey method was adopted for the proposed study. The data were collected by interviewing the class teachers of respective class. It was administered in regular class hours. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained during the study. The parents of the selected samples were approached and personal interview was conducted at school and at home setting to elicit information about the stress symptoms and its sources of their children.

Method of analysis:

To find out the demographic characteristics, sources of stress and stress symptoms, frequency and percentages were calculated. Means and Standard deviations were calculated to find out the levels of stress.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The results obtained from the present investigation are presented below:

Prevalence of stress in children :

The stress level of the children was categorized into high level, moderate level and low level of stress. The prevalence and level of stress among boys and girls, and in different grades are presented in Table 1, 2 and 3.

It was evident from the results (Table 1) that stress was prevalent among the children. Few of the children were suffering from high level of stress. The children of highly stressed group were staying with relatives as their parents were either divorced or their houses were far from the school. The results revealed that stress is prevalent among children due to various sources namely

Levels of stress	No. of children (n=192)	
	Frequency	Percentage
High	31	16.15
Moderate	129	67.19
Low	32	16.66

academic and family related. When these children are unable to cope or handle the stressful situations they exhibit their stress frequently through various symptoms. In a nuclear family where there are only one or two children parental expectations are high and hence children are to put lot of effort to satisfy parental demands which triggers stress in children.

It has been seen that majority of the children suffering from low level of stress are academically sound, for which they are not exposed to punishment from teacher, restrictions from their parents in watching television or other recreational activities. Majority of the children (67.19%) were moderately stressed.

When the prevalence of stress was seen in gender it was revealed that there was no gender difference in relation to levels of stress. Today's parents are less gender biased and equal opportunities are being provided by the parents for both boys and girls to reach their full potentials in all creative and educational activities. Moreover all children irrespective of their gender are exposed to similar kind of environment at school, home and in the community. Therefore stress level experienced by boys

and girls were found similar.

Levels of stress have also been studied separately for children of each grade. Results (Table 3) showed that higher percentage of children from first grade (25.80%) and fifth grade (32.26%) were found to be highly stressed compare to the children of other grades. This may be indicative of the fact that the beginning of late childhood is marked by the child's entrance into first grade or elementary grade. It is the time that children begin to expose to a wide range of new curriculum and experiences. This new environment along with the pressure to maintain good grades can be very stressful for a child. While adjusting to the new demands and expectations of elementary grade, most children are in a state of disequilibrium and react differently to this stressful situation. The older children who were in fifth grade experienced high level of stress, which may be due to the fact that as the children completed their fourth grade in government primary schools, the necessity for entering into fifth grade made them move to another school where they have to adjust with many new demands and experiences. The findings can be supported by the study of Streight and Copeland (1998) who found that stress in children is usually caused by new, unfamiliar, or unpredictable situations; Unclear expectations; anticipation of something unpleasant; or the fear of failure (socially or academically), and major developmental "hurdles" (moving from elementary to middle school, leaving home).

Levels of stress	No. of children (n=192)			
	Boys (n=96)		Girls (n=96)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
High	17	17.71	14	14.58
Moderate	62	64.58	67	69.79
Low	17	17.71	15	15.62

Standards	Levels of stress					
	High (n=31)		Moderate (n=129)		Low (n=32)	
	F	P	F	P	F	P
I	8	25.80	21	16.28	5	15.62
II	4	12.90	19	14.72	7	21.87
III	1	3.22	17	13.17	12	37.5
IV	2	6.45	25	19.38	3	9.37
V	10	32.26	22	17.05	2	6.25
VI	6	19.35	25	19.38	3	9.37

F=Frequency

P=Percentage

Conclusion:

From the foregoing discussion, it could be concluded that stress was prevalent during late childhood. Few of the children suffer from high level of stress while majority are moderately stressed. There were no gender differences in relation to levels of stress. But stress level was high among the children who were in the first and fifth grade compared to the other grades. Due to high parental expectations, busy schedule, overloaded assignments, unable to meet teachers' expectation, restriction over recreational activities, children experienced stress. And due to these situations, children react to stress by showing physiological, socio-emotional behavioural symptoms and showed changes in academic performances. The parents should understand their child's abilities and capacities and prepare their children to deal effectively with stressful situation and provide stress free environment to their children.

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