

# Sources of stress in Australian families and characteristics of stress resilient children

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*In the present study 647 families with a kindergarten aged child along with their teachers were surveyed and a sub-group of parents were interviewed with a view to understanding the types of potentially stressful events the child had experienced along with their kindergarten adjustment. Commonly experienced personal events included birth of a brother/sister, hospitalisation and death of some-one they knew. Social and economic events commonly encountered included moving home and unemployment of a parent. In all, 25.3% of children were rated by teachers as 'poorly' or 'very poorly' adjusted at kindergarten. Stress resilient compared with stress affected children were adjudged by teachers to (1) be better able to tolerate frustration, (ii) to show leadership abilities and (iii) to enjoy better peer relations. One outcome of this study has been the development of a video/discussion package entitled 'stressed out and growing up'. Developed in consultation with parents, teachers and health educators the package provides a resource for examining the effects of stress on children and adolescents*

**A** woman in her late 20's was being interviewed as part of this study of stress in families with young children. Married, with two children under five years of age she had agreed to participate in the study in part because of the five stressful life events her family had experienced in the last four years including (i) death of one of her parents (ii) hospitalisation of the oldest child for a serious illness (iii) unemployment of her husband (iv) her own serious health problems and (v) the burglary of the family home. As noted by the interviewer, the overwhelming impression given by the woman was one of isolation, despair and helplessness. The exhaustion of the woman was compounded by her attempts to balance the roles of wife, mother and assistant in her husband's new business venture. The kindergarten child was assessed by teachers to be coping well at school.

As any parent of a young child would know, conversation at a function such as a school fund raiser or busy-bee invariably touches upon the hassles and stressors that are an all too familiar part of raising a young family. Stretching the budget to make ends meet, employment concerns, matters of health, child discipline, and coping with inter-personal relationships all absorb a considerable

amount of time and energy. Rodd (1992:24) in her study of stress in young mothers argued that:

... mothers of young children are stressed, not just slightly or moderately stressed but experiencing extreme levels of emotional stress in relation to their parenting role.

She further notes

Stressed adults and adults who experience difficulties in coping with and adjusting to our apparently increasingly stressful society are not uncommon (p.24).

Presently though, detailed information regarding the nature of stressors facing contemporary Australian families is lacking.

Of course, stressful life events have a broader impact than on just the individual, and their effects usually resonate throughout the family. For example, the hospitalisation of a young child will disrupt the working life of the providers, effect the daily house-hold routine and place extra demands on the care-giver's nurturing resources to cite just a few effects. The issue of how stressful life events are related to young children's development is now recognised as an important area of research.

Studies typically show a modest correlation between stressful life events and psychological problems in children

(Coddington, 1983; Slee, 1993). It is now better understood that the relationship is a far from simple one and that children, like adults, vary widely in their individual response to stress. Children who cope well with stress have been variously labelled 'invulnerable' (Anthony, 1974; Garnezy, 1981), 'stress resistant' (Garnezy, 1981) or 'resilient' (O'Grady & Metz, 1987). Resilience generally refers to the unusual capacity of an individual to deal with significant stressors without developing emotional or behavioural problems. Presently researchers are concerned with understanding the nature of the behaviours which distinguish stress resilient from stress affected children.

The purpose of the present pilot study was to identify the extent and nature of stressors facing contemporary Australian families with young children. A further intention was to identify the specific behaviours noted by teachers that distinguish stress affected from stress resilient children.

## Method

The eighteen kindergartens in the study were located in predominantly lower to middle class suburbs of metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. All of the children in the study had enrolled at the beginning of the year. The 647 children included approximately equal number of girls and boys.

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Table 1: Children's adjustment to kindergarten as rated by teachers and parents and the frequency of family stressful life events

Global adjustment rating	Very well adjusted	Adjusted	Average	Poorly adjusted	Very poorly adjusted
teachers' ratings (% n=647)	12.8	29.9	32.0	19.4	5.9
parents' ratings (% n=647)	13.3	48.1	38.5	0.2	0

The percentage of stressful life events (abbr) experienced by the family in the kindergarten-aged child's life time (n=630)

	Total sample (n=630)	Stress affected (n=34)	Stress resilient (n=23)
1. birth of a sibling	52	65	68
2. family moved house	26	47	47
3. parent lost job	21	42	47
4. child hospitalised	37	63	55
5. death of some-one the child knows	30	38	52
6. family faced greater than usual financial hardship	21	52	50
7. parent hospitalised	8	13	19
8. parents separated	15	36	28
9. parent unemployed	23	44	53
10. parents divorced	4	8	11
11. family home burgled	17	37	27
12. family had psychological counselling	5	9	16
13. other people moved into home	13	31	28
14. a parent away from home frequently	18	32	37
15. less marital harmony	14	32	37
16. a family member robbed/attacked	5	10	5
17. a child had psychological counselling	5	10	10
18. parent(s) changed jobs	31	50	61
19. older child left home	2	4	3
20. a serious illness in the family	13	24	30
21. consistent discipline problem with child(ren)	14	38	22
22. parent(s) had major changes in work responsibilities	15	17	22

#### PROCEDURE

Kindergartens were contacted and parental permission was obtained for the study. Parents completed a 24 item stressful life events (SLE) checklist developed for this study but based on previous research (Work et al, 1990). Parents and teachers completed a global rating of the children's kindergarten adjustment using a Likert scale ranging from (1) very well adjusted to (5) very poorly adjusted.

#### SUBGROUP SELECTION.

To be considered for inclusion in the stress affected (SA) and stress resilient (SR) groups a child had to have experienced more than four stressful life events (SLE's) as noted from the checklist completed by the parents (a criteria used by Cowen et al, 1992). Beyond that, to qualify as SA the child had to be in the bottom 1/3 of poorly adjusted ratings by teachers (n=34). Conversely, SR children had to be in the top 1/3 of teacher ratings of well adjusted at kindergarten (n=23).

#### SUBGROUP MEASURES.

The 55 caregivers in the two subgroups were contacted to arrange an interview time. They were paid a nominal fee for their time. The measures included a series of open ended questions regarding coping skills along with a number of questionnaires.

#### My Child Scale (MCS)

Parents completed a six item MCS developed for this study and based on previous research (Slee, 1986). The items (eg, 'my child has few friends at kindergarten') were rated on a Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Half of the items were negatively worded to avoid response bias. They tapped adjustment to kindergarten, leadership qualities, peer relations and self reliance. The alpha score for the MCS was .66.

#### Teacher-Child Kindergarten Adjustment Scale (T-CKAS).

Teachers completed the 14 item T-CKAS developed for this study. The items (eg, 'the child has settled into kindergarten') were rated on a Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) with half of the items being negatively worded to avoid response bias. Some of the items overlapped those in the MCS with small changes to the wording to accommodate teachers. The items tapped adjustment to kindergarten, leadership, peer relations, self reliance, academic performance and coping with personal needs. The alpha value for T-CKAS was .89.

#### Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS)

This 38 item scale developed by Hightower et al (1986) assesses a diverse range of classroom behaviours and competencies from kindergarten to year seven. Part 1 lists 18 problem behaviours that teachers rate on a 5 point scale (1 = not a problem; 5 = very serious problem).

These items comprise 3 six item factors (acting out in class, anxiety, learning problems). Part 2 has 20 items that assess children's competencies on a 5 point scale (1 = describes not at all; 5 = describes very well). These items comprise four factors (frustration tolerance, assertiveness, task orientation, peer sociability). The scale has adequate reliability and validity (Hightower, et al, 1986).

## Results

Findings relevant to teachers' and parents' global ratings of adjustment to kindergarten, and the percentages of parents indicating that the stressful life event had occurred during the kindergarten aged child's life-time are presented in Table 1.

From Table 1 it can be seen that teachers rated 25.3% of kindergarten children in the present sample as 'poorly' to 'very poorly' adjusted. There was a large disparity with parents' evaluations of 0.2% with equivalent ratings.

As shown in Table 1, the mean number of SLE's for the sample was 3.51 while the equivalent figures for SA and SR was 6.51 and 6.81 respectively. On average, the SA and SR groups had experienced almost double the number of SLE's as the rest of the sample. Large differences existed between the frequency of reported SLE's for the total sample and the sub-groups (SA & SR) for a number of items. Thus, families in the SA & SR sub-groups had:

- moved house more
- suffered more unemployment
- experienced a greater incidence of child hospitalisation
- faced greater financial hardship
- experienced greater levels of marital separation
- other people move into the family home more often
- experienced less marital harmony
- more discipline problems with children.

To identify attributes associated with childhood resilience, the stress affected (SA) sub-group (n=34) was compared with the stress resilient (SR) sub-group (n=23) using a number of questionnaire measures.

- **My Child Scale (MC).** In relation to the 6 item scale SR children were perceived by their parents to exhibit higher leadership qualities ( $t=-2.19$ ,  $p<.05$ ).
- **Teacher-Child Kindergarten Adjustment Scale (T-CKAS).** Resilient children compared with SA children were rated by their teachers as (i) significantly better in leadership qualities ( $t=-2.64$ ,  $p<.01$ ); (ii) better liked by peers ( $t=-2.01$ ,  $p<.01$ ); more independent and self reliant ( $t=-2.23$ ,  $p<.03$ ) and (iv) more settled into kindergarten ( $t=-2.60$ ,  $p<.01$ ).
- **Teacher-Child Rating Scale (TCRS).** Teachers rated resilient children compared with SA children as significantly better in terms of (i) their

ability to tolerate frustration ( $t=2.67$ ,  $p<.01$ ) (ii) their use of assertive social skills ( $t=3.47$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and (iii) peer social skills ( $t=3.28$ ,  $p<.002$ ).

## Discussion

The findings of the present study highlight that young children in families are likely to have faced a range of potentially stressful life events as part of the family's life cycle. Commonly experienced events included (i) the birth of a sibling (ii) hospitalisation of a child (iii) parents changing jobs (iv) shifting home (v) death in a family and (vi) unemployment of a parent. The stressors reported represent a range of episodic (eg, hospitalisation) and chronic (eg, unemployment) events. To further clarify the picture in future research, some assessment is needed of the impact of these events on the family or children. This research is currently under way in a further study in the program at Flinders University.

Unexpectedly, in the present sample 25.3% of the children were rated by teachers as 'poorly' to 'very poorly' adjusted. In a previous study 8 years ago (Slee, 1986) teachers using the same global rating scale reported that only 13.3% of kindergarten children were 'poorly' or 'very poorly' adjusted. It is difficult to discount the significance of this finding given that teachers were surveyed at the same time of the school year, that the age and sex of the children were proportional and that the children came from a similar range of socio-economic groups. It raises the possibility that there has been an increase in the level of children's adjustment problems, at least as perceived by teachers. There was no such change between the two studies in terms of the parent's perceptions of adjustment difficulties (2.3% v 0.2%). As such, the study is being replicated.

In relation to the second aim of the study, there were some important differences between the total sample and the stress affected and stress resilient groups' experience of certain stressful life events. In particular, the SA and SR groups reported experiencing considerably more problems with (i) illness (ii) financial hardship (iii) relationship (eg, separation) and (iv) child discipline. This finding indicates that the relationship between family social and economic background eg, financial resources and child adjustment, warrants further investigation (Ferguson, Harwood & Lawton, 1990). Ferguson et al (1990) suggest that the presence of adverse social and/or economic circumstances may increase a

child's vulnerability to problems. In view of the considerable economic and structural changes taking place in contemporary Australian society, further research is needed to assess the impact of these changes on children, and in particular, the factors that buffer or protect children against the effects of stress. A further research project at Flinders University is using path analysis to better understand the contribution that economic hardship and family structure makes to children's response to stress.

Teachers differentiated between stress affected and stress resilient children's behaviour in a number of ways. As judged by teachers, stress resilient children overall (i) were more able to tolerate frustration (ii) demonstrated greater initiative and leadership (iii) enjoyed better peer relations. The findings of the present study add to existing research involving older children (Cowen et al, 1992) and suggest that from an early age stress resilient children possess attributes, skills and competencies that may help buffer them against the effect of significant life stress, as exemplified by the child cited in the opening case study.

...environmentally derived protective factors include self esteem, a strong sense of identity and a readily available support network of family, relatives and friends. In particular, a warm and trusting relationship with at least one adult who provides a basic sense of unconditional regard, is important.

Protective factors contributing to resiliency embrace nature and nurture. Temperamental factors associated with flexibility and adaptability suggest that easy-going and accommodating natures are associated with greater resiliency in the face of stress. More environmentally derived protective factors include self esteem, a strong sense of identity and a readily available support network of family, relatives and friends. In particular, a warm and trusting relationship with at least one adult who provides a basic sense of unconditional regard, is important.

