

# What Stresses Australian Children?

Phillip T. Slee

*A sample of 1,146 children ranging in age from 5-13 years was assessed for stressful life events across the life-span. Children reported experiencing, on average, seven events during their lifetimes. Boys reported more such events than girls. The impact of multiple life events on children's adjustment is discussed in the paper.*

**L**ike adults, children too experience stress in their lives. In his book, *My Brother Jack*, George Johnston describes the early childhood of two Australian children growing up in post World War Two Australia. In powerful images he describes the impact of his parent's quarrels on him and his brother as children.

One must allow for time's foreshortening, but I can hardly recall a night when I was not awakened in panic by the strong violence of my parent's quarrels. Often Mother would run from the house in the dead of the night, swearing never to return, and there was one specially terrible occasion when Jack and I were awakened in the sleepout by the sound of Mother, who was outside in the rain and darkness, whimpering like an animal as she tried to crawl into hiding beneath the Dollicus (Johnston, 1964, p. 39).

Psychological research indicates that stresses are with us from birth and are an everyday part of childhood experience (Honig, 1986; Compass, 1987). As adults, "time's foreshortening" may blur some of our memories of events that stressed us as children and the effects of such events on our behaviour.

In reviewing the literature it is possible to identify a number of factors associated with stress in children and these may be categorised as (i) ecological or (ii) personal variables. Ecological variables associated with stress in children include parental circumstance e.g. poverty or marital discord (Rutter, 1979), parental discipline style (Baumrind, 1983), birth of a sibling

(Dunn et al., 1981), divorce of parents (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), and hospitalisation (Kapelis, 1983). Personal variables associated with the sex of the child indicate that male children are more vulnerable to stress than female children (Honig, 1986). Intellectual ability as associated with adjustment suggests that IQ functions as a protective factor in terms of the effects of life stressors.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the nature of stressful life events as adjudged by Australian children and the relationship of such stressors with gender and age.

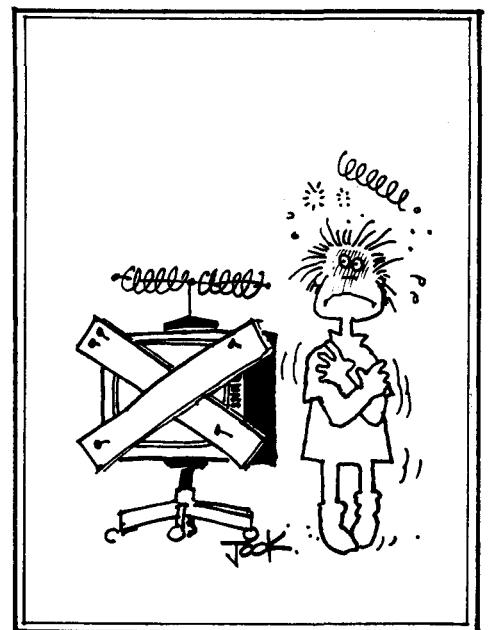
## Method

**Subjects:** The total sample of 1,146 included children from schools around metropolitan Adelaide. There were 560 females and 586 males and the sample ranged in age from 5-13 years.

**Measures:** A twenty-five item "Stressful Life Events" questionnaire adapted from Brown (1985) was used. The measure includes a range of stressful events from severe (death of a parent) to mild (not allowed to watch a favourite T.V. programme). The measure did not include obviously important stressors such as child abuse or domestic violence because of their sensitive nature and as such there are limitations to the conclusions which can be drawn from the results. Items that were of a chronic adverse nature such as poverty were also excluded. Rather the present measure focuses on discrete, identifiable behavioural events. Previous research (Brown 1985) has shown the twenty-two item version of the measure to be

of adequate validity (.67) and reliability (.61). In the present study alpha coefficients of .68 were obtained.

**Procedure:** After the project was approved by the principals and parents the children were individually interviewed in the school. The children were instructed to identify those stressors that had occurred in their lifetime. That is, a life-span approach was adopted. Prior to testing the children were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Children were carefully monitored by the interviewers for any adverse reactions to the questions but none were noted. The interviews were conducted by students completing a teaching degree at Flinders University. All interviewers had received instruction in interview techniques.



Phillip T. Slee is Lecturer in Human Development, School of Education, Flinders University of South Australia. GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001. Tel: (08) 201 3328; Fax: (08) 201 3184

Table 1. Frequency of children's reported stressful life events for age and gender.

	5-7yrs	8-10yrs	11-13yrs	Male	Female
1. Best friend moved	23.0	28.4	30.4	28.3	27.4
2. New sibling	38.5	39.6	37.1	41.1	37.3
3. Relative moved in	14.1	11.0	13.0	13.5	12.0
4. Changed school	19.1	32.7	48.0	33.8	35.8
5. Parent job loss	13.4	14.7	13.8	14.7	13.2
6. Parent divorce	13.4	17.5	19.5	18.3	16.3
7. Parent moved away: work	15.2	16.7	12.2	14.8	14.2
8. School suspension	0.7	1.7	2.7	3.4	0.9
9. Parental remarriage	6.4	11.0	11.9	11.4	9.2
10. Parents not home much	39.6	36.1	30.6	35.0	35.4
11. No watching TV	55.8	48.7	38.2	48.5	45.7
12. Hospitalisation	31.4	31.6	29.8	35.8	26.9
13. Parental death	2.5	3.0	1.9	2.6	2.6
14. Friend moved into home	9.5	6.5	9.5	9.7	8.0
15. In trouble and sent to Principal	5.7	14.5	34.4	29.0	10.4
16. Relative died	36.7	57.6	64.0	53.1	57.1
17. Bad test mark	20.5	39.0	47.2	42.2	33.9
18. Operation	25.4	32.9	27.6	34.0	25.7
19. Bullied by others	57.6	50.0	44.4	52.6	47.7
20. Moving home	39.9	42.6	43.9	40.1	43.2
21. Parental accident	17.0	18.8	14.6	17.2	16.8
22. Parental separation	13.4	18.4	22.2	19.5	18.2
23. Older sibling left home	5.7	9.7	11.4	11.1	9.4
24. Caught stealing	3.5	3.2	9.2	8.2	3.5
25. Caught bullying	10.6	14.1	18.2	21.2	8.2

## Results

The findings of this study are presented in terms of the study's principal foci namely descriptive information on the nature of life events experienced by children. In Table 1 the frequency of occurrence of stressful life events experienced by children is reported along with age and sex differences.

From Table 1 it can be seen that the most frequently reported stressful life events include "death of a relative" (55.1%) and "Not being allowed to watch a favourite T.V. programme" (47.0%). The least frequently occur-

ing stressful life events were suspension from school (2.1%) and death of a parent (2.6%). Analysis showed that children experienced an average of 6.0 stressful life events with a range of 0-16. The t-tests showed that males reported experiencing significantly more stressful life events than females ( $X^2=6.35$  vs  $5.65$   $p<.01$ ,  $t=3.31$ ). A one-way ANOVA of the three age groups with the number of stressful life events showed that there were significant differences between the three age groups in terms of the reported number of stressful life events. Duncan tests comparing individual sub-group means indicated that the

older age groups reported experiencing significantly more stressful life events than the younger age group.

In a further analysis of the data, eight of the twenty-five life events were selected as representing significant stressors. Guidelines in choosing the events were taken from Sterling, Cowen, Weissberg, Lotyczewski and Boike (1985) in that the events were (i) behavioural (ii) negative rather than positive and (iii) largely beyond the child's control. The eight events were (1) birth of a sibling (2) death of a parent (3) divorce of parents (4) separating of parents (5) serious accident involving parent (6) hospitalis-

ation of child (7) child operation and (8) child caught stealing.

***The purpose of the present study was to explore the nature of stressful life events as adjudged by Australian children and the relationship of such stressors with gender and age.***

The analysis showed that 25.1% of the total sample had experienced 3-8 of the identified "serious" events in their life-time while 25.0% had experienced no such events. Chi-square tests indicated a significant relationship between gender and number of stressful life events ( $X^2 = 15.1, p < .01$ ). Males reported experiencing more stressful life events than females. A significant relationship was also found between age and stressful life events ( $X^2 = 12, p < .04$ ). The age group 8-9 years reported experiencing significantly more stressful life events than other age groups.

## Discussion

The present findings indicated that the twenty-five life events presented to a sample of Australian children ranged broadly in terms of frequency of occurrence. The average of 6.0 stressful life events and the range of 0-16 is in accord with the life-span research of Cowen (1985). Overall, from this descriptive data we can concur with Brown and Cowen (1988) that children experience a fair number of stressful life events in their formative years.

In the present study boys reported having experienced significantly more stressful life events than girls. On a cautionary note this study represents only children's perceptions so alternative means are needed for validating this finding e.g. parental reports. However, it is interesting that research has identified males as more "at risk" than females (Rutter, 1983) and it is possible that stressful life events have had some part to play in this.

Developmental trends were also apparent in the present study with 11

-13 year olds reporting significantly more stressful life events than 5-7 year olds. This finding is consistent with the research of Brown & Cowen (1985) and is in accord with the life-span perspective of the present study.

In examining children's exposure to multiple stressful life events some interesting findings emerged. The proportion of 25% of children who reported experiencing 3-8 serious life events emphasised that not only have children in the sample experienced a fair range of stressful life events in their formative years but quite a number have experienced multiple events. At this point it is worth noting Rutter's (1983) belief that negative life events may accumulate in a multiplicative fashion suggesting that multi-stressed children may be particularly at risk. Moreover the evidence is that boys report experiencing more multiple events than girls.

***...not only have children in the sample experienced a fair range of stressful life events in their formative years but quite a number have experienced multiple events.***

Part of the value of the present study lies in its life-span developmental perspective. Previous research has been more short-term in its orientation (6 months to 2 years: Lewis, Siegal & Lewis, 1984; Swearingen & Cohen, 1985). As such, we now have a better overall picture of the nature and frequency of stressful life events affecting Australian children.

To return to George Johnston's opening quote in this article, the present study of Australian children's reports of stressful life events, provides a timely reminder to adults not to allow "times foreshortening" to blind us to children's experience of such events. There is a growing body of evidence linking stressful life events with adjustment problems (Sterling et al. 1985, Honig, 1986). Presently, the author is conducting research relating children's stressful life events and school adjustment. ♦

## References

- Baumrind, D. (1983) "Rejoinder to Lewis's Re-interpretation of Parental Firm Control: Are Authoritative Families Really Harmonious?" *Psychological Bulletin*, 94, pp.132-142.
- Brown, L.P. & Cowen, E.L. (1988) "Children's Judgements of Event Upsettingness and Personal Experiencing of Stressful Events" *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16, pp. 123-124.
- Compass, B. (1987) "Coping with Stress during Childhood and Adolescence" *Psychological Bulletin*, 101, pp. 393-403.
- Dunn, J., Kendrick, C. & MacNamee, R. (1981) "The Reaction of First Born Children to the Birth of a Sibling: Mother's Reports" *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 22, pp.1-18.
- Honig, A.S. (1986) "Stress and Coping in Children" *Young Children*, 5, pp. 51-63.
- Johnston, G. (1964) *My Brother Jack*, Collins: London.
- Kapelis, L. (1983) "The Effect of Video-taped Modelling on Young Children's Knowledge and Attitudes about Hospitals" *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 8, pp. 32-36.
- Lewis, M.A., Siegal, J.M. & Lewis, M.A. (1984) "Feeling bad - exploring stories of distress among pre-adolescent children". *American Journal of Public Health*, 74, pp. 117-122.
- Rutter, M. (1979) "Protective Factors in Children's Responses to Stress and Disadvantage" in M.W. Kent & J.E. Rolf (eds) *Social Competence in Children - Primary Prevention of Psychopathology* Vol.3, Uni Press.
- Rutter, M. (1983) "Stress, Coping and Development: Some Issues and Questions" in N. Garnezy & M. Rutter (eds) *Stress, Coping and Development in Children*. McGraw Hill: New York.
- Sterling, S., Cowen, E.L., Weissberg, R.P., Lotyczewski, B.X. & Boike, M. (1985) "Recent Stressful Life Events and Young Children's School Adjustment" *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 13, pp. 87-98.
- Swearingen, E.M. & Cohen, L.H. (1985) "Measurement of Adolescent Life Events: the junior high school life experiences survey", *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 10, pp. 341-362
- Wallerstein, J.S. & Kelly, J. (1980) *Surviving the Break-up: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*. Basic Books: New York