
Brief Report

The Incidence of Stressful Life Events of Elementary School-Aged Children

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Certain events, commonly found in the life histories of children, have been characterized as potentially stressful (Rutter, 1981). There is some evidence to support the hypothesis that these events play a role in the etiology of various disorders, although the nature of that relationship is not clear (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974). Yet that relationship remains the subject of considerable interest, as can be seen by the number of studies on the influence of stressful life events on children's emotional adjustment and school performance (Boike, Gesten, Cowen, Felner, & Francis, 1978; Felner, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1981; Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975; Gesten, Scher, & Cowen, 1981; Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975; Gesten, Scher, & Cowen, 1978; Rolf & Garmezy, 1974; Sandler & Block, 1979; Siegel, 1981).

Sandler and Ramsey (1980) have suggested that the role of life events as stressors can be understood to be a function of, among other things, the frequency of occurrence of events. For research and clinical assessment purposes, baseline data on the incidence of stressful life events of children seem to be necessary.

In order to collect and organize baseline data, the relevant demographic variables must be identified. It was hypothesized that there might be two relevant demographic variables: age and socioeconomic status (SES).

The purposes of this study were to (a) conduct a survey to gather baseline data on the incidence of stressful life events of children, and (b) examine the effects of age and SES on the number of events reported.

METHOD

The potential respondents in this study were the parents of 400 schoolchildren, aged 5 through 14 years. Their names were selected randomly from a list of parents in a school district in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. The district was selected because it seemed fairly representative of various socioeconomic groups.

After permission had been obtained, the parents were mailed a copy of the Children's Life Events Inventory (Chandler, 1981), a listing of 37 events typically found in the lives of

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children. They were also sent a SES Questionnaire which used Hollingshead's Four-Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975). A short cover letter asked the parents' cooperation by requesting they follow the instructions on the life events inventory, checking those events which occurred in the life of their child from birth until the present. Follow-up letters were sent to those who did not respond within 2 weeks.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

A total of 277 responses were received. Of those, 97 (35%) were classified as low SES, 75 (27%) were classified as middle SES, and 105 (38%) were classified as high SES.

The number of events checked by parents were tallied to gain an incidence score for each child. Because previous research had established a positive correlation between the number of events and age (Hoesch, 1982; Hoesch & Chandler, 1983), and because all events since birth were reported, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed, using age as the covariate, in order to compare the mean number of events reported by the parents in the three SES groups.

The ANCOVA showed significant differences among the number of events reported by the parents in the three SES groups ($F = 9.18$, $df = 2, 273$, $p < .001$). It confirmed the significant relationship between age and the number of events reported, and a Sheffé post hoc comparison showed a significant difference in the mean number of events reported between the low and high SES groups ($t = 4.28$; $p < .001$). Finally, frequency distributions for the inventory items were calculated for each of the three SES groups (Table I).

In summary, the results of this study suggest that potentially stressful life events are reported frequently in the life histories and current situations of children. As might be expected, age is an important variable affecting the number of events reported, with older children having a greater number of events reported than younger children. SES is another important variable, with children from families in lower SES groups having more events reported than children in higher SES groups.

Table I. Incidence of Life Events of Elementary School-Aged Children by SES Groups

Children's Life Event Inventory	Percentages			
	Low SES (<i>n</i> = 97)	Med SES (<i>n</i> = 75)	High SES (<i>n</i> = 105)	Total (<i>n</i> = 277)
Severe illness requiring hospitalization of parents	36.0	37.3	33.3	35.3
Birth of brother or sister	55.6	56.0	52.3	54.5
Child needed special education services	20.6	18.6	15.2	18.0
Loss of job by parent	46.3	45.3	22.8	37.1
Death of grandparent	42.2	44.0	47.6	44.7
Mother beginning to work	43.2	54.6	49.5	48.7
Changed schools	48.4	50.6	50.4	49.8
Serious illness requiring hospitalization of child	21.6	16.0	19.0	22.0
Death of a parent	7.0	4.0	2.8	4.6
Acquiring a visible deformity	2.0	1.3	1.9	1.8
Increased arguments with brothers and sisters	28.8	40.0	24.7	30.3

Table I. Continued

Children's Life Event Inventory	Percentages			
	Low SES (n = 97)	Med SES (n = 75)	High SES (n = 105)	Total (n = 277)
Change in child's acceptance by peers	10.3	9.3	14.2	11.5
Academic failure	12.3	16.0	6.6	11.1
Becoming involved in drugs and alcohol	1.0	1.3	0.0	0.7
Addition of a third party to family (i.e., grandmother)	21.6	17.3	14.2	17.6
Death of brother or sister	4.1	1.3	0.9	2.1
Vision problem requiring glasses	27.8	25.3	28.5	27.4
Jail sentence of parent	3.0	1.3	0.0	1.4
Hearing problem	19.5	6.6	4.7	10.4
Death of a close friend	8.2	6.6	2.8	5.7
Illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	19.5	25.3	8.5	16.9
Having a visible congenital deformity	1.0	0.0	1.9	1.0
Learning problems in school	25.7	18.6	7.6	16.9
Speech problems	22.6	12.0	14.2	16.6
Frequent absence of one or both parents	24.7	17.3	14.2	18.7
Beginning school	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Physical child abuse	0.0	2.6	0.9	1.0
Increase in number of arguments between parents	22.6	24.0	17.1	20.9
Suspension from school	2.0	2.6	0.9	1.8
Brother or sister leaving home	10.3	17.3	13.3	13.3
Divorce of parents	25.7	10.6	16.1	18.0
Foster home placement	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.3
Family moves; relocations	25.7	21.3	27.6	25.2
Poor grades in school	24.7	26.6	10.4	19.8
Marriage of parent to stepparent	10.3	4.0	4.7	6.4
Marital separation of parents	22.6	8.0	14.2	15.5
Increase in number of arguments with parents	22.6	22.6	6.6	16.6

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