



## Stress in Younger School Age Children

### Symptoms, Causes, Stress Management Options

#### Summary

The contemporary world is full of events that arouse various emotions and result in stressful situations. Not only is stress part of adult life, but it often permeates children's lives too, although childhood should [ideally] be associated with joyful experiences, safety, untroubled days full of loving care provided by family and play with parents and peers.

Postmodernism, a new phenomenon of the 21st century, is in itself a source of stress in our lives, as it is characterized by the category of difference, multiple discourses, varied paradigms that define the world in various different manners, lack of generally acceptable *universum* (absence of core values), overburdening with the influx of too much information and necessity to make a great number of decisions.

That signalled aspect of plurality and multidimensional nature of social and cultural reality makes childhood assume multiple forms, contrastive from the social, environmental and cultural point of view. That is why in contemporary world we can distinguish *'low quality' children* (homeless, poor, living in the streets) and *'high quality' children* —'consumer'-type children functioning in accordance with what their parents programmed for them, brought up to succeed, well-invested, well-fed and well-educated in elite schools. The lives of children from both those categories may be full of stress. Coping with shortfalls and poverty triggers many stressful situations, yet striving to meet the expectations of adults who want their children to go from success to success and to demonstrate independence, as well as the sense of loneliness connected with those and many other situations (divorce, family conflict) function as dangerous stressors able to disturb the child's emotional, social, intellectual and somatic development.

The presented work is an attempt to characterize child stress and show the degree to which stress dimension is present in children's 'world'. The subject will be presented on the basis of accounts given by children finishing early school education and also from the perspective of mothers of those children and early school education teachers. The work is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses selected areas of the issue of stress; the second chapter shows emotional aspects of stressful situations, with focus on child stress. The third chapter is a presentation of environmental stressors of childhood, while the fourth one has a methodological and empirical dimension, presenting results of own research and its analysis related to the accounts of eight- and nine-year-old children and

opinions of their mothers and teachers. The study covered 280 children finishing their early school education, their mothers (also 280), as well as 100 integrated education teachers. Six hundred and sixty surveys were collected. Also, 30 uncategorized interviews were conducted with children randomly chosen from the study participants. The children were asked to talk about situations that triggered negative emotions in them and also relate to the subject of finding advantages in experiencing such negative situations. The research concentrated on three aspects: determining the qualities of child stress, studying children's response to stressful situations and diagnosing what support is offered to children in such situations.

In the first research area, an attempt was made to determine the frequency and intensity of experiencing stress, including the frequency and intensity of fear/anxiety, sadness, anger, i.e. negative emotions that are part of stressful situations. Stressful events in children's lives were also of interest, as they revealed the causes of negative emotions in the discussed situations. In the second research area, children's activity in stressful situations was analysed. The research attempt was to come up with a list of physiological and behavioural-cognitive reactions occurring in children under the influence of negative emotions that are the constituents of stress, and recognize the strategies employed by children to cope in such stress-inducing situations. That part of the research also aimed to find out to what extent children are able to recognize positive aspects of stressful experiences. The third area of the research has been devoted to support offered to children by their parents and teachers and on educational activity related to stress management offered by schools and the options for widening that offer.

The obtained research results reveal that stress permeates children's lives and accompanies everyday situations in various areas of their existence. The intensity with which the studied 8- and 9-year-olds experience stressful situations indicates that those situations are immensely difficult for them and that the causes triggering such situations are perceived as important, even 'critical'. This is reflected e.g. by parents' quarrels, reported by children as events frequently occurring in family life. Such domestic disputes may assume the features of critical events requiring vital changes in the individual's life and behaviour. As the research shows, stressful situations produce specific physiological effects in children (crying, headaches, problems with sleep, abdominal pain) and behavioural-cognitive reactions, such as gloomy mood, avoiding company, engaging in conflicts with siblings and peers. Apparently, those reactions form a kind of continuum that makes it possible to recognize two 'child stress styles'. One of them is directed 'inwards' (staying away from other people), while the other is directed 'outwards' (engaging in conflicts with one's environment). Stress-triggering situations require children to cope with the problem and with the emotions connected with it. The predominant one from among those strategies is the strategy of 'looking for guidance and support', and also 'making attempts to forget about the problem' and 'undertaking alternative forms of activity'. Valuing such strategies by children shows that at least some of them have already entered the developmental path directed at independent coping with stress and testing the efficiency of various strategies.

Contemporary research on the subject of stress emphasizes the value of looking for positive meaning of negative events and trying to find the beneficial aspects of stressful experience. The considerable percentage of studied children stated that stressful situations, filled with anger, sadness, fear or anxiety, did have a beneficial aspect. Children were often unable to give specific examples of such advantageous aspects, yet some of them were able to do it perfectly, which testifies to the occurrence of developmental changes taking place in those children as they begin to understand the significance of difficult experience in life, its

influence on the individual and the importance of overcoming difficulties. It also testifies to their ability of cognitive and emotional processing of difficult situations that they encounter.

One should not forget that childhood is the period in life when children can gradually get accustomed to difficult situations and stress under the 'watchful eye' of protective adults; they can gain experience in coping with stress to be able to solve their own problems efficiently in the future and be able to help others in that respect. The definitely heart-warming element of the picture of child stress obtained through own research is that children have the sense of being accepted by their parents and mostly receive proper support from their mothers, fathers and teachers. It should be underlined here that effective ways of coping with problems and social support are the two main factors protecting a child against the negative effects of various difficult situations that generate crisis stress, chronic stress, or simply everyday stress. Therefore, acquainting children with the ways to cope with stress by adults should be a vital part of early school education as crucial for their further lives.

An important line of research was to find out whether and to what degree school and educators provide children with assistance in managing stressful situations and negative emotions and whether they teach them any competencies in that field. In order to answer those questions, teachers were asked the following survey question: Are there any organized forms of teaching children stress management skills in your school? The survey provided a large percentage of positive responses. Teachers mentioned such activity forms as: classes with a psychologist or guidance counsellor, assertiveness workshops, drama classes, relaxation classes, listening to therapeutic fairy tales and discussing them. When asked about the frequency of such activities, teachers usually responded 'adequately to the needs', 'once a year' or 'once a month'. The considerable percentage of questioned teachers (predominantly with over 20 years of professional experience) stated that they covered subjects related to that topic at their classes. The results obtained for stress management aspect may give rise to some concern, particularly as regards the frequency of school activities addressing that issue. The frequency of conducting stress-related classes as stated in teachers' answers, i.e. 'once a year' or 'once a month', is definitely insufficient for children to master the specific knowledge and skills in that area. The 'as required' frequency indicates lack of any specific schedule (at schools) with clearly defined tasks aimed at developing necessary competencies related to the stress dimension. Only systematic, not occasional, activity can bring the desired results.

Another research question posed was the interdependence between the selected demographic features of respondent children (age and sex), their mothers (age and education) and teachers (years of service) and the different opinions of those respondent categories on the issue of child stress. As follows from the conducted studies, the age and sex of children are the factors making their accounts about stress differ in many aspects. For instance, boys declare that they experience fear/anxiety less frequently than girls and their experience of sadness is not very intense. Girls more often than boys declare that in their attempts to cope with stress they tend to 'look for guidance and support'. Examining the age of the respondents, one can observe that eight-year-olds have more intense experience of sadness than nine-year-olds, more often have sleep problems and are more prone to low moods when facing difficulties. Therefore, eight-year-olds require much more emotional care than nine-year-olds, as the difference between those two age groups is pronounced.

It has been revealed that demographic factors characterizing mothers and teachers also play an important role in differentiating their opinions on child stress; this is found to be particularly relevant for mothers with higher education and those whose age is forty-plus

and for teachers with more than twenty years of professional life. The results show that those categories of mothers and teachers are characterized by greater attentiveness and sensitivity to children, display greater understanding of children's needs and notice more frequently certain aspects of difficult situations occurring in the lives of 8- and 9-year-olds. Being more reflective, they may be expected to create more favourable developmental conditions for children than younger mothers, mothers with lower level education, or less experienced teachers.

The obtained empirical data also allow one to make a general conclusion related to the children's 'line' of development as regards their functioning in stressful situations. The analysis of the causes of negative emotions identified by the children, their declared stress-coping strategies and their opinions on finding positive aspects of stressful experience reveal that some children are aware of the emotional states they are going through and search for the ways to cope with them. They analyse the effectiveness of such strategies by seeking support among their close ones – talking, questioning, asking for explanations of the problem or for emotional support. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial for adults present in the child's life environment (family, school) not to overlook that particular moment in the child's development and offer the child support by developing his or her emotional and social competences and problem-solving skills. As should be emphasized here, according to Jerome Kagan's concept of the developmental nature of child stress, the initial conceptualization of stressful events is shaped within the first 10 years of life; over that period, children learn to identify potential stress factors and interpret stressful events. That is why early school period is so important in developing children's knowledge and skills related to functioning under stress.