

Children's Stress and Coping

A Family Perspective



Elaine Shaw Sorensen

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*For Rulon and Jean,
Brian, Chad, Johanna,
. . . and Todd*

The terms “stress” and “coping” have almost become clichés in professional and popular literature. We seem to encounter stress-events lists and stress-management advice at every turn, from the social science library to the grocery check-out. Unfortunately, however, stress remains a daily, universal reality, and effective responses continue to be as elusive as ever. Stress affects each member of the family, as well as the entire family unit. Despite increasing interest in stress-coping research among adults and families, little is known about how stress is actually perceived by children in the setting of their own families.

My interest in stress-coping phenomena began in a graduate introductory course in stress management. As the course progressed and I practiced the prescribed techniques, I found amazingly little to associate with my own daily life. Sources of stress in adults, families, and children have largely been identified as particular life events, traumatic situations, or demands for change. And stress management programs have primarily been directed toward the promotion of relaxation techniques. Extensive study has related stress to illness and maladaptation. But few investigations have been directed toward the proportion of study populations that remains healthy or seems able to avoid or overcome maladaptive effects of stress. Peck (1978) proposes that although science has been able to identify determinants of illness and cure, it has not been able to do so for the origins of resistance and health:

We know very well why people become . . . ill. What we don't understand is why people survive the traumas of their lives as well as they do. . . . All we can say is that there is a force, the mechanics of which we do not fully understand, that seems to operate routinely in most people to protect and to foster their . . . health even under the most adverse conditions. . . . We know a great deal more about the causes of physical disease than we do about the causes of physical health. (pp. 237-239)

There have been few studies of how healthy people cope with the ordinary stress of daily life. Currently, some researchers are assessing adult stress and coping in day-to-day life. However, there has been little exploration of stress and coping processes in the daily lives of children, particularly from the holistic perspective of the family.

As a mother, I have found few professional applications which I could imagine being relevant for my own children. I have been struck by the need to see the world of children from the child's own viewpoint. This point came in clearly one evening in a restaurant as I dined with my four children. As I repeated the usual litany from the children's menu to my 5-year-old daughter—grilled cheese sandwich, hot dog, spaghetti (the children's menu is the same, no matter what the restaurant)—she interrupted indignantly, "This time I'm ordering from the *human* menu!"

From my own children, and from the children for whom I have cared as a nurse in clinical practice, I have learned that children live in a unique culture that most of us have forgotten; that children, if given a chance, can and will readily articulate the joys and vicissitudes of their daily life. Further, children are capable of sharing insights into their own needs and responses.

The difficulty in studying children's stress and coping within the family realm has been potentiated by inadequacies in conceptual frameworks and by methodological complexities, such as recognizing and studying appropriate informants, or measuring aggregate and individual data. Further, issues of stress-coping phenomena have most often reflected marital, child-rearing, or life-transition challenges reported by adults. Subjective data from the child's view of family life are sparse. There is a need for multidisciplinary collaboration and for merging theoretical philosophies and methodologies that accommodate variables from the viewpoints of individual and aggregate, child and parent, pathology and health.

The purpose of this work is to explore issues in the study of stress-coping phenomena, and to identify and describe daily stressors and coping responses as actually experienced and reported by school-age children.

Chapter One reviews various perspectives for the study of stress-coping phenomena. Among the perspectives described are the: (1) individual perspective on individuals, (2) family perspective on families, (3) adult perspective on children, (4) child perspective on children, and (5) family perspective on children. Traditional definitions of stress and coping variables are then described, which largely reflect an individual perspective on individuals. The works reviewed in Chapter

One have set the traditional course for definition of concepts and approaches to study. Implications for current child and family study are offered.

In Chapter Two, the foundation of the individual's perspective is carried further into family study, reflecting a family perspective on families. The chapter deals largely with theoretical viewpoints, exploring traditional theoretical frameworks in family and stress-coping study. I then suggest an integrated approach to family stress-coping theory, combining concepts and methods from a classic family stress-crisis theory and a cognitive-transactional stress-coping model. General areas in family stress research are then reviewed, with critique pointing to specific needs related to the study of children within the family.

Concepts of stress-coping phenomena specifically among children are reviewed in Chapter Three, reflecting the children's perspective on children. Concepts of stress, coping, appraisal, and mediating variables and interventions are discussed as they appear in research literature about children. Implications for theory and methods are explored.

Chapter Four offers a report of my own study of daily stressors, coping responses, and mediating resources as actually experienced and reported by a group of 42 healthy school-age children. Data were drawn from semistructured daily journals kept by children and parents over a period of 6 weeks. Content analysis resulted in taxonomies of daily stressors, coping responses, and coping resources, with comparisons of their frequencies among parents, boys, and girls. Such taxonomies are an attempt to organize the rich data from children, in order to provide foundations for future research and valid instrument development. Direct comparison of child and parent diaries also revealed specific themes reflecting high and low scores on parents' ability to take the perspective of the children in reporting daily stress-coping phenomena.

Such data offer insights into a family perspective of children's daily stress-coping experiences and allow a descriptive exploration of relationships among stress, coping, and resource themes.

Children's diaries included the option of daily colored drawings. The value of children's spontaneous art work as enriching, qualitative, descriptive data is described in Chapter Five. Drawings enhanced the diary entries, and offered insights into the child's view of family phenomena. A few actual drawings are shared. Though some of the detail and richness of the original colored drawings are lost in their black-and-white presentation here, the whole picture of children's perceptions would be incomplete without them.

Chapter Six reviews the meaning for research and clinical practice

of both the literature analyses of Chapters One through Three, and the actual data reported in Chapters Four and Five. Epistemological viewpoints are explored, as well as needs in empirical research and clinical practice among children.

Two pervading themes throughout all chapters are the need for refinement of methods and for increased multidisciplinary approaches to study. Literature is reviewed in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, family studies, nursing, medicine, art therapy, child development, and others. Needless to say I am not an expert in so many fields and the review is not exhaustive. However, while surveying such vast and varied works, I was struck by both overlap and gaps in the areas of concept definition, theory development, and valid clinical application related to families and children. The extent of the contributions of disciplines to the study of stress and coping is daunting. We now need to begin to learn each other's languages, integrate, and validly test our combined knowledge.

This book offers a critical review of current scholarship related to children and families, and provides the actual results of a particular study of children. Taking such an approach—making bold critiques and suggestions related to the theories, methods, and practice of others, while reporting on an original empirical study that does not adequately address all the issues raised—exposes the author to a risk. I take that risk, acknowledging that my own study, reported in Chapters Four and Five, does not respond to all issues, concerns, and needs described in Chapters One through Three and Six. However, I offer the work as an attempt to begin to see and respond to the subjective view of families, particularly the child's viewpoint within the family.

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Perspectives for Study: Traditional Approaches to Stress and Coping

Stress affects every system within the human organism, as well as every human social system, including the family. Cultural changes exert escalating pressures on modern families, requiring children to endure stressors unknown to previous generations. Helping children and families to cope successfully with life trauma and daily life stress is of increasing interest to nurses, social scientists, and family therapists. It is the purpose of this book to explore the psychosocial stressors and coping responses of daily life from the viewpoint of school-age children. The work views the child in the context of the family, rather than as an individual in a clinical setting, and highlights the value of the child as an informant in family research.

The concepts of stress and coping, as they apply to family research and therapy, emerge from the evolution of many biological and psychosocial pursuits. Scientific interest in this body of knowledge has proliferated in recent years, due partially to its universal relevance. Professional reports and public literature offer an abundance of theoretical, methodological, and empirical explorations of stress and coping (see Appley & Trumbull, 1986; Boss, 1988; Field, McCabe, & Schneiderman, 1988; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Kasl & Cooper, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McCubbin & Figley, 1983; McCubbin, Sussman, & Patterson, 1983; Monat & Lazarus, 1991).

A research study of stress-coping phenomena among school-age children will be reported later in the book. This chapter will review perspectives, traditional conceptual definitions, and research approaches, providing a historical foundation in concept development, context, and direction for the study to be reported.

PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL MAPS FOR STUDY

Before such a review, it is important to understand both the perspectives and analytical matrix by which concepts are examined. First, the study of stress experiences among individuals and families has been approached from several important perspectives. Although theorists and researchers often approach concepts from assumed viewpoints or contexts, it is important to recognize that there may be several epistemological perspectives. The idea of "perspective" here may have three related meanings: (1) the point of view that is represented, (2) the unit of analysis, and (3) the types of explanatory factors that are involved. Some examples of the viewpoints for study of stress-coping phenomena among families are listed below:

1. *An individual perspective on individuals.* This viewpoint defines stress-coping phenomena from the perspective of the individual's experience that may or may not include related interactions with other individuals or groups, such as the family. The work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is probably the best example of this perspective.

2. *An individual perspective on families.* This viewpoint reveals the experience of an individual in relation to interaction with family members and situations. Some of the work on stress management seems to emerge from this point of view, where interventions are aimed at individuals, with family factors included as antecedent or outcome variables.

3. *A family perspective on families.* This type of framework examines the interpersonal stressors and/or coping strategies and styles that are characteristic of the entire group called "family." Examples among the works of McCubbin and colleagues (McCubbin & Figley, 1983; McCubbin, Sussman, & Patterson, 1983) use a viewpoint of stress perceptions and coping styles as experienced by the entire family unit. Indeed, most theoretical and empirical efforts in family studies would probably fall into this category.

4. *A situational perspective on individuals, families, or children.* This more distal approach studies stress-coping phenomena within conceptual, social, or environmental contexts as they relate to the individual or family unit. It would provide a "wider" (social, biological, demographic, extra-familial, social systems, etc.) viewpoint on family members or units. Examples include the numerous demographic analyses of family phenomena or studies from cultural, legal-political, educational, medical, or other institutional systems. Other examples are those works that

focus on particular stressor events or life transitions (i.e., the advent of parenting, retirement, or elder-care, or illness, bereavement, etc.) and subsequent individual or family responses. Distal social and environmental contexts related specifically to children might include the neighborhood-peer-friend culture, characteristics or perceptions of the school environment, occupational patterns of parents, or even influences of larger economic or political situations.

5. *An individual (adult) perspective on children.* This viewpoint represents the traditional study of stress-coping phenomena in children, which has devised instruments and drawn conclusions about children based on revised adult-framed knowledge. Examples include the life-events lists and stress-management interventions for children that are adapted from the adult versions. Other examples include works where adults, such as parents, teachers, or clinicians serve as informants about children.

6. *A child perspective on children and/or families.* A few studies have attempted to describe stress-coping phenomena from the viewpoint of children themselves. Yamamoto, Soliman, Parsons, and Davies's (1987) rankings of stressors by children, and the use of children's subjective responses by investigators such as Ryan (1988), Sorensen (1990, 1991), and Walker (1986) provide examples.

7. *A family perspective on children.* This type of framework explores the effects of proximal family phenomena on the responses of individual family members. The study of children from the viewpoint of the individual family unit is a fairly rare, but important, approach to understanding children and families. Children are the analytical units, while family variables become proximal, contextual antecedents and/or consequences. A family perspective on children might also focus on interpersonal stressors and coping responses for familial subgroups, such as parent-child dyads, or child sibling groups.

This list is not exhaustive and represents only explanatory viewpoints for study, not ways of knowing based on philosophy of science. Indeed, each perspective mentioned might be approached from a number of epistemological philosophies, such as positivistic, phenomenological, and feminist, to name a few.

Larzelere and Klein (1987) described a similar matrix adapted from Levinger (1977) for generating research questions and explaining methodological approaches. Along two axes of antecedent variables and consequent variables, their matrix listed the following units of analysis: individual, dyad, nuclear family, extended family, situation, and society. For emphasis, I have added the unit of children, which

should fall under the unit of "individual," in the study to be described. Walker (1985) also argued that the interdependent levels of individual, dyad, family group, social network, community, and culture/history must be accommodated in the development of family stress theory.

The study to be described later in this book (Chapter 4) assumes a *family perspective on children* (perspective 7). However, the direct perspective of children on themselves (perspective 6) is also of primary importance for the validity of the study. In addition, to a limited extent, the viewpoints of other individuals (parents and siblings) (perspective 5) are provided.

The preceding list of approaches also applies to the study of many phenomena other than stress and coping. Indeed, Larzelere and Klein's (1987) matrix was proposed generically as a framework for generating and clarifying any questions, concepts, and propositions in family study. Most research in family studies would claim to fit into category 3—"a family perspective on families"—and theorists and researchers, however unintentionally, often see that viewpoint as the only way to study every topic relevant to studies of families. Such a limited approach to context is unfortunately common in social science research.

Acknowledging the viewpoint of a study is important because it influences both data sources and assumptions in analysis. There is some controversy about which data source best represents the assumed point of view. For example, if one represents the viewpoint of the child, it seems reasonable to argue that data ought to originate from the child at the cultural and developmental level of the child, rather than from an adult report.

Further, it seems reasonable to expect that a "family perspective" would draw data from several, if not all, family members. Unfortunately, few instruments have been developed to accommodate either the point of view of young children or the complexity of multiple informants.

Recognition of perspective, or point of view represented, is only one aspect of study in a complex conceptual scheme. Thus, to trace a conceptual map of stress-coping phenomena in children and families can be a complex epistemological task. The image becomes less that of a map, with a linear route to a specific conceptual destination, but rather that of a multidimensional matrix, with attempts to untangle and reweave conceptual threads.

Primary among the tangled yarns is the definition of terms. The term "stress" has been used to refer to physiological, psychological, and social demands, each with long continua of perception and severity. The importance of physiological factors in stress and health, usually as dependent variables, is well recognized in clinical study. However, the

larger body of this work will focus on psychosocial stressors and responses. The concept of coping as a response to stressors includes factors of perception or appraisal, as well as individual and environmental resources.

A contrasting thread lies in units of observation. Units of observation include individuals (children and adults) and social groups (nonfamilial and familial). Nonfamilial groups could include occupational groups or groups brought together by particular stressful events, such as prisoners of war or inpatient groups. This work will not address nonfamilial groups.

Another knotty issue is that of "family." Units of analysis in family research have included individuals and groups, including the marital couple, parent-child dyads, and sibling groups. Stress has been examined within families, upon families, and interactionally within and upon various individual family members. Other factors, such as stressed relationships (not simply stressed persons) or family variables as either antecedent or dependent variables in stress-coping phenomena, further compound the issues of the matrix. In this study the "family" studied was the traditional parents-with-minor-children nuclear household.

The other major concept relevant to this study is that of "children." While some may use the term "children" broadly according to a familial relationship—that is, one who is chronologically subordinate to a parent regardless of age—this work assumes the traditional developmental *prima facie* view of the child as the minor offspring within a family. Acknowledging some references to preschool, adolescent, or even to adult children, the study to be reported may only be validly generalized to school-age children.

As a historical background for clarification, rationale, and "re-weaving" of the study to be reported herein, this chapter will review traditional conceptual issues in stress and coping and will explore foundation works that emphasized adult individuals as the unit of analysis, with brief references to related works on children and families. This chapter will also discuss traditional definitions of stress and coping, the nature of the problems studied, and implications for research about children and families.

TRADITIONAL STRESS-COPING DEFINITIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Stress

The first major obstacle in conducting an inquiry into stress-coping phenomena has been the absence of an adequate, generally accepted

definition of stress. Historically, several interpretations have been used. As in other areas of early social research, terms and methods were borrowed from the physical sciences. Hence, early definitions included such concepts as "forces, stress, cause and effect, resistance, dynamics, and determinism" (Sorensen, 1986, p. 5). Cannon (1932) described stress as a disturbance of homeostasis under extreme internal or external environmental conditions, and proposed that the degree of stress might be measured.

Selye (1974) defined stress as the "nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (p. 14). He further recognized the concept of "eustress," as "good" stress that does not provoke maladaptive responses. Selye's interpretation of stress as a fairly predictable constellation of psychophysiological responses to noxious stimuli called stressors, described in his General Adaptation Syndrome (Selye, 1956), significantly influenced modern stress-coping research. Subsequent definitions of stress, following Selye's orientation, include the following:

1. The physical or mental effect or disturbance of, or interference with, any of the body's automatic biological processes (Stephan, 1971)
2. A psychophysiological arousal which, if prolonged, can fatigue, damage, or lead to disease in the organism (Girdano & Everly, 1979)
3. A condition in which a discrepancy exists between the demands, loss, threatened loss, or life events and the individual's capacity to respond, thus threatening conditions essential to health (Caplan, 1976)
4. The result of unsuccessful coping (Swogger, 1981)

Obviously, there has been some ambiguity in defining stress as to whether it refers to the stimulus (some call this the stressor), to an intervening process, or to the resultant maladaptive factor in health and illness. Mason (1975) noted that "the term 'stress' has been used variously to refer to 'stimulus' by some workers, 'responses' by some workers, 'interaction' by others, and more comprehensive combinations of the above factors by still other workers" (p. 29). Rutter (1983) observed that "stress seems to apply equally to a form of stimulus (or stressor), a force requiring change of adaptation (strain), a mental state (distress), and a form of bodily reaction or response (that is, Selye's general adaptation syndrome of stress)" (p. 1). However, Lazarus (1966) asserted that stress is not "stimulus, responses, or intervening variables, but rather a collective term for an area of study" (p. 27).