1992

Developmental fears of elementary children: A review of the literature

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Abstract

It has been estimated that clinical treatment for fear-related disorders has been sought for between 4 and 8% of the children in the United States. It is hypothesized that twice as many children who are potential patients remain untreated (Morris & Kratochwill, 1983). Further, the effects of fear may carry over into school and affect academic work (Robinson, Rotter, Fey, & Robinson, 1991; Robinson, Robinson, & Whetsell, 1988). Fear may range from that which serves to enhance positive self preservation to that which has an inhibiting or debilitating affect on children (Robinson et al., 1988).

DEVELOPMENTAL FEARS OF ELEMENTARY CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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July 1992

This Research Paper by: Melinda K. Smoldt

Entitled: DEVELOPMENTAL FEARS OF ELEMENTARY CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

July 1, 1992
Date Approved

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Adviser/Director of Research Paper

6-30-92
Date Approved

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July 5, 1992
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It has been estimated that clinical treatment for fear-related disorders has been sought for between 4 and 8% of the children in the United States. It is hypothesized that twice as many children who are potential patients remain untreated (Morris & Kratochwill, 1983). Further, the effects of fear may carry over into school and affect academic work (Robinson, Rotter, Fey, & Robinson, 1991; Robinson, Robinson, & Whetsell, 1988). Fear may range from that which serves to enhance positive self preservation to that which has an inhibiting or debilitating affect on children (Robinson et al., 1988).

Educators are becoming aware that they must deal with the whole child, including intellectual, social, and emotional aspects. A child who comes to school in an emotionally disturbed state cannot be expected to perform normally at school (Angelino, Dollins, & Mech, 1956; Newhouse, 1987). Although all children will experience fear as part of normal development, not all will learn to cope with fear effectively (Robinson et al., 1991).

In addition to the rather predictable fears which nearly all children experience, those who have experienced personal or collective disaster are at high

risk for developing fear related problems (Robinson et al., 1991). An already high level of stress makes such children more susceptible to fear (Robinson et al., 1991).

Three distinct terms are used to differentiate among levels of severity of children's fears: phobia, anxiety, and fear. Morris and Kratochwill (1983) defined a phobia as an intensive fear which becomes debilitating to a child's life, due to intensity of affect and extended duration of two years or more. Phobias are not age related, nor are they a response to any obvious external danger. In addition, phobic reaction is beyond voluntary control and leads to avoidance of the fear situation.

Anxiety refers to a diffuse, physiological reaction that is not triggered by a conscious stimulus (Morris & Kratchowill, 1983). In the extreme, anxiety may be classified as panic.

Fear, although a term that is often used interchangeably with the terms phobia and anxiety, is most generally a less intense reaction than either of the latter (Morris & Kratchowill, 1983). Additionally, fear is "the anticipation of, or our awareness of, exposure to injury, pain, or loss" (Robinson et al.,

1991). Smith, Davidson, White, and Poppen (1990) defined fears as normal developmental reactions to real or perceived threat; they will change over time and as a result of maturity. Fear is highly individualized and affected by social and environmental variables.

Specific fears appear at about the same ages for all children and, as they learn to deal with them, their lives continue without great disruption (Jersild & Holmes, 1933; Morris & Kratchowill, 1983; Robinson et al., 1991). It follows that school counselors need to be aware of normal developmental fears so that they may facilitate children as they work through such fears and prevent them from becoming more severe. Successfully coping with developmental fears provides a means for children to adapt to life stressors (Morris & Kratchowill, 1983). Counselors working with children need, in addition, to be aware of differing levels of fear in order to be able to work with children or refer them to outside agencies for assistance.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the literature in relation to normal developmental fears of elementary school children. Environmental influences and developmental patterns will be explored. In

addition, implications for elementary school counselors will be reported.

Developmental Patterns of Children's Fears

Common Fears

An early study, that of Jersild and Holmes (1933), identified 10 common fears of children: certain animals, scary movies, nightmares, supernatural beings, frightening gestures, dark places, spooky stories, night apparitions, creepy noises, and accidents. Angelino et al. (1956) cited seven different categories of fears: safety, school fears, natural phenomena, animals, health, personal appearance, and social relations. Differences in categories may relate to differences in subject age span between the two studies; Jersild and Holmes (1933) surveyed children ranging in age from 5 years to 12 years, while Angelino et al. (1956) included subjects aged 9-18 years. In both studies, fears relating to the dark, animals, and personal injury were frequently cited.

In general, fears of five, six, and seven year olds are imaginary (Robinson et al., 1991). Ghosts, witches, and monsters are frequently mentioned by children in kindergarten and grades one and two (Robinson et al., 1991). Related to imaginary and

supernatural fears, is fear of the dark. It is a basic fear for elementary children, particularly, but not limited to primary grade aged children (Angelino et al., 1956; Bauer, 1976; Giebenhain & O'Dell, 1984; Graziano & Mooney, 1980; Jersild & Holmes, 1933; Hudson & O'Connor, 1981; Kanfer Karely & Newman, 1975; Kellerman, 1981; Merritt, 1991; Morris & Kratchowill, 1983; Morocco & Camilleri, 1983; Orton, 1982; Protinsky, 1985; Robinson et al., 1991; Robinson et al., 1988; Smith et al., 1990; Wolman, 1978).

Angelino et al., (1956) proposed that animal fears occur in children younger than 9 years old, and decrease rapidly thereafter. Other researchers have cited animals as frequent fear objects for only 5 and 12 year olds (Robinson et al., 1991). The investigators hypothesized that fear of being alone/separation may be a manifestation of concern due to the large number of latch key children in our society today.

Fear of people, often reported as a fear of intermediate grade children, was named in the Robinson et al., (1988) study by younger children as well. The researchers proposed that this unexpected fear object, being named by even the youngest participants, could be

a response to media publicity or "stranger danger" programs in our schools. Bauer (1976), while studying kindergartners and second graders, found that the younger of the two groups of children tended to identify feared objects or people by appearance. Second graders were more apt to talk about the actions of the fear object. Both groups equated death with monsters.

As children enter the intermediate grades, imaginary fears give way to those of a more realistic nature due to increased cognitive development (Bauer, 1976; Robinson et al., 1991). As cognitive capability develops, a child will learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Morocco & Camilleri, 1983). In addition, "growth proceeds from a global state, with lack of differentiation, to one of increased differentiation of internal representations of objective reality" (Bauer, 1976, p. 71). At about the age of 8, children become more realistic concerning cause and effect. Additionally, children aged 8 to 12 have increased verbal symbols with which to understand reality. While Robinson et al., (1991) found bodily injury fears being manifested primarily at ages 9 through 12, Morris and Kratchowill (1983) stated that

such fears were prevalent for elementary children of all ages.

Older children, in general, cite a greater number of fears than do those younger than 8 years with fear of humans increasing with age (Pratt, 1945, cited in Robinson et al., 1988). Bauer's (1976) investigation reported that sixth grade children tend to identify feared persons by action rather than by appearance, as do kindergarten students.

Death is recognized as a universal phenomenon by children at approximately 9 years of age (Bauer, 1976). In support of this notion, Bauer found that 10 year olds equated death, realistically, with injury or separation.

Researchers found that school fears, such as those of tests or grades were prevalent between the ages of 9 and 12 (Robinson et al., 1991). Similarly, fear of punishment was a major concern of older children. Fear of natural hazards and machinery also increased with the age of elementary children (Pratt, 1945, cited in Robinson et al., 1988).

In refutation of the earlier Mauer (1965) study, in which it was reported that children older than 11 do not mention the dark as a major fear, Robinson et al.,

(1988) found that fear of the dark and fear of being alone appear to be major fears for children of all ages. The later study also put forth the idea that older children, due to societal pressure, may be less inclined than their younger counterparts to admit to fear of the dark and related fears.

Clearly, while there are commonalities in stated fears of elementary children, there are differences within age levels. It would seem that environmental factors need to be explored as well.

Children's Development and Response to Fear

Infants react to fear, produced by discomfort, in a generalized manner and, with age, children learn to fear certain objects or situations (Kellerman, 1981; Ross, 1951; Wolman, 1978). Kellerman (1981) proposed that the majority of fears are learned due to an increasing awareness of the environment on the part of the child. Fears are thus learned by means of parental modeling, association of objects with threat or danger, and consequences, which most often promote avoidance of the fear stimuli. If parents or significant others model irrational fear of stimuli, the child may learn an irrational fear of the object. Prolonged association of a fear object with threat results in

phobic reaction and may prevent normal transitory reaction to the stimulus.

The seriousness of the fear, contended Smith et al., (1990) lies in the intensity and duration of the fear stimuli. Intensity is defined as the degree of the power of the stimulus or fear object in relation to how fearful the child becomes. Duration refers to the amount of time the fear stimulus is experienced and recognized.

Wolman (1978) reported a positive correlation between intelligence and realistic fears with bright young children expressing more fears, while intelligent older children limit the number of fears, due to increasingly accurate perception of threat. Conversely, Robinson et al., (1988) reported little difference with regard to fears and reporting intelligence.

Morris and Kratchowill (1983) cited three kinds of response to fear: motoric behavior; cognitive behavior, including unpleasant affect and cognitions about the situation; and physiologic response, including accelerated heartbeat, sweating, or altered respiratory function. Wolman (1978) stated that fear activates secretion of adrenalin or non-adrenalin in

order to facilitate fight or flight. In addition, such arousal results in cognitive responses, or types of internal processes which alter fear reactions.

As children mature, unless taken by surprise, they learn to react to threats in a rational and mature way; they develop a mental control apparatus to deal with fear. Smith et al., (1990) theorized that coping behavior has to do with amount of control over some aspect of the fear situation; being able to problem solve; having a positive self concept; and being independent. In like manner, Robinson et al., (1988) described coping in terms of security or a sense of well being; self worth, or the belief that one is capable and of value; and control, or a sense of action upon the environment.

Similarly, allies and power were described by Wolman (1978) as being central to coping with fear. Power is the perception of the ability to survive and satisfy needs; the term "allies" refers to the persons or resources outside of oneself that may be called upon to aid in a threatening or fear producing situation. Robinson et al., (1991) reported that children who successfully handled fear situations felt less vulnerable and became more confident in future

situations, while those children who were less successful approached new situations with trepidation.

A 1975 study (Kanfer, Karely, & Newman) investigated the tolerance of 5 and 6 year olds to remaining in a darkened room. The study reported that self descriptions involving self competency statements ["I am a brave boy/girl" (p. 253)] were more effective than were the aversive ["The dark is a fine place." (p. 253)] stimuli reducing statements. Least effective in toleration of the dark in terms of either duration or illumination, were the neutral statements ["Mary had a little lamb" (p. 253)].

Few studies have examined the duration of children's fears over time. Other than the Jersild and Holmes (1933) study of stability over a three week period, the only reported research which covered a longer period of time, prior to 1978, was the five month study by Pozanski in 1973 (cited in Erme & Schmidt, 1978). Thus, Erme and Schmidt's study would seem important to the understanding of this aspect of children's fears.

The subjects in the Erme and Schmidt (1978) study were 27 fourth graders (17 male and 10 female) randomly chosen from an elementary school in a small midwestern

community. Data were collected by individual interview both at the beginning of the study, and one year later. The children were asked what they were afraid of at the time of the first interview and again one year later.

The total number of fears reported in the first interview of the Erme and Schmidt study (1978) was 129 (mean, 4.8); in the second interview the total was 121 (mean, 4.5). A significant amount of instability was reported in individual cases, but when the group was considered as a whole, the number of fears was stable. Eighty-three percent of the specific fears named at the outset of the Erme and Schmidt study were again subjects one year later. Individually, the average number of fears of those children whose number of fears changed was 1.6 per child. The three most common fears reported fell into the categories of bodily harm, threat of injury as a pain event; robbers, kidnappers, or death; and animals.

The study by Erme and Schmidt (1978) contradicted Jersild and Holmes' (1933) conclusion from their study that three-fourths of the children's fears did not last throughout the three week reporting period. More important is the contradiction to Pozanski's 1973 study (cited in Erme & Schmidt, 1978) in which it was

concluded that duration of fear in excess of five months differentiates fears of emotionally disturbed children from those of normal children.

It is possible that subjects in Erme and Schmidt's (1978) study were represented by a large number of emotionally disturbed children. On the other hand the short duration of both the Jersild and Holmes (1933) study and the Pozanski (1973) study may not have allowed for proof of longer duration of normature fears.

Differences in Fears: Gender, Socioeconomic Status, and Time

It has been reported that in children with ages ranging from 5 to 13, little difference was found between the fears reported by boys and those reported by girls. Girls' fear of accidents and strange noises were not similarly reported by boys, while boys' fear of snakes and strangers were not viewed as being among the most alarming fear stimuli by girls. While boys showed a wide range of fears, girls showed homogeneity (Angelino et al., 1956; Robinson et al., 1988).

Conversely, Pratt's 1945 study (cited in Robinson et al., 1988) and Croake and Knox's 1971 study (cited in Robinson et al., 1988) concluded that girls reported

more fears than boys. Pratt (1945) cited girls as being more fearful of insects, illness, disease, and the dark than boys, whereas boys feared wild animals and schoolwork more than did girls.

Angelino et al., (1956) reported that whereas girls' concern about schoolwork peaks at ages 11 and 12, this concern peaks for boys at age 13. A study by Orton (1982) of 8 to 10 year olds concluded that there was a significant difference in perceived fears between boys and girls, with girls reporting greater concerns in the categories of natural phenomena and animals. Fifth and sixth grade girls in the same study indicated that personal adequacy, health and well being, and imaginary fears were greater fears than they were for the boys. No difference between girls and boys was reported in the category of school fears.

Bauer (1976) and Kagan (1986, cited in Robinson et al., 1988) suggested that differences in fears reported by older elementary boys as opposed to those reported by girls of the same age were attributed to socialization of boys to believe that it is desirable not to be afraid. For example, in a study conducted with boys and girls in intermediate grades, Bauer (1976) found that 70% of the girls, as opposed to only

10% of the boys, admitted to having fear of bedtime or bad dreams. In contrast, primary grade boys and girls admitted to such fears in about equal proportions.

The review of literature indicated the difficulty of determining whether actual differences in fears between same age girls and boys do exist. It may be possible, as Bauer (1976) contended, that cultural expectations, increasing with age, make it difficult for boys to admit to being frightened.

Studies to determine differences in fears according to socioeconomic status of children (Angelino et al., 1956; Robinson et al., 1988; Jersild & Holmes 1933) have been done for the past 60 years. Beginning in 1933, Jersild and Holmes detected differences in fears between those subjects attending private schools and those attending public schools. The private school children were concerned with the possibility of danger and noises, whereas the public school children feared abandonment, the supernatural, and animals.

Angelino et al., (1956) investigated fears of boys and girls of "upper" and "lower" socioeconomic families. Conclusions of the study were that there was little difference in numbers of fears between the two groups, but that the specific fears did differ. In

general, poorer children appeared to be most concerned about animals, bad people, and failure in school. Well to do children feared bodily injury, physical danger, the dark, and being alone.

It would appear that the socioeconomic environment has some impact on the normal fears of elementary school children. Are boys and girls of lower socioeconomic circumstance less concerned about safety than those children in more wealthy homes because they have had more opportunity to cope with such issues, allowing them to move developmentally on from that fear?

In attempting to replicate a study of Pitner and Lev (1939, cited in Orton, 1982), researchers studied fears of 5th and 6th graders and found differences in fears of children in the original study as compared with those reported by children in 1982. Prominent in the Pitner and Lev study (1939) were the findings that "earlier" boys worried more about economics. "Present" girls verbalized more fears than girls of the past. Fears related to family disharmony concerned more "present" children than "past" children. Boys in the 1982 study worried about strangers; those in 1939 did not. All in all, the boys had the most feared

categories in common, but differences became more obvious when examining least feared categories.

Merritt (1991) also reported differing results in investigating night fears of present day children as compared to those fears expressed by children in the past. While present day children do have night fears, specific stimuli include robbers or kidnappers attacking the child or the child's family. Earlier reports cited fear of the dark or animals as being most fear provoking.

Apparently, basic normative fears may be manifested in differing fear objects depending on the child's environment or culture (Orton, 1982). For instance, present fears of kidnappers or robbers may reflect children's exposure to media depicting such events (Merritt, 1991). Familial concerns about parents getting along, a present day fear, may be related to today's prevalence of divorce (Orton, 1982). A change of female status in our present society may provide a clue as to reasons for the girls in later studies listing more specific fears than did those in earlier studies.

Fear Cycle

Smith et al., (1990) designed a theoretical model of children's fears. The five component model is based upon the assumption of normative developmental fears, which will change as a result of maturation and experience, rather than upon excessive fear or phobia. Since the conditions of the fear situation will affect the coping behavior, they will also affect the level of adaptation achieved. With positive adaptation, the child may achieve a higher level organizational status, whereas, maladaptation may result in a disorganized state. The development of this model of children's fears provides a framework for the understanding of individual differences of children's fears, the possible development of related school curricula, and facilitation of coping behaviors by practitioners and parents.

Robinson et al., (1991) proposed a fear cycle to aid in the understanding of children's fears. Like the Smith (1988) model, it emphasized the cyclical nature of fear, wherein an adaptive conclusion to the fear situation would impact the next fearful situation. Robinson et al., (1991) envision the cycle as an aid

for counselors' facilitation of children's coping behaviors in fear-related situations.

Interventions for School Counselors

Assessment

Although developmental fears are normal and transitory affective states for children, school counselor intervention may sometimes be warranted. Personal disasters of a traumatic nature, such as the loss of a parent through death or divorce or collective disasters, such as earthquakes and tornadoes put children at greater than usual risk for exaggerated reaction to the fear (Robinson et al., 1991).

Morris and Kratchowill (1983) suggested that intervention would be necessary if the normative fears became excessive, lasted over an extensive length of time, or created problems in living for the child or the parents. Similarly, Kellerman (1981) proposed that life disruption, intensity, and duration are benchmarks that indicate therapeutic intervention.

Interventions for Unspecified Developmental Fears

It has been suggested that school counselor intervention may occur in three arenas: home, classroom, and individual counseling sessions (Morroco & Camilleri, 1983; Newhouse, 1987; Robinson et al.,

(1991). Robinson et al., (1988) made the point that counseling and consultation strategies should be aimed at control, self worth, and security issues for children.

Consultation or counseling with the family may help parents or siblings to understand the fear situation from the child's point of view (Morroco & Camilleri, 1983; Protinsky, 1985). The parents expectation that the child has the power and control to overcome the fear are powerful determinants of outcome (Kanfer et al., 1975). Counselors can be educative of parents by helping them to understand that fears should not be used to secure discipline, nor should children's fears be dismissed or ridiculed. Conversely, parents should be encouraged to listen and help children explore possibilities to defeat "monsters" in their lives (Robinson et al., 1991).

Classroom discussion related to age appropriate fears aid children in dealing with those fears (Morocco & Camilleri, 1983). Particularly helpful is discovering that others share like fears. Animal stories or the use of puppets make it easier for primary children to admit and discuss fears (Morocco & Camilleri, 1983). Counselor facilitation in designing

lessons for teachers to use to normalize fear objects is suggested. For instance, fear of the dark may be lessened through the study of night creatures, people who work at night, or astronomy (Robinson et al., 1991).

Counselors, in working with elementary children having specific fears, will utilize a variety of therapeutic strategies (Morocco & Camilleri, 1983). Providing cathartic release through play media or pretending serves the dual purpose of helping the child release anger and hostilities while maintaining the boundary between fantasy and reality. Robinson et al., (1991) stated that utilizing play media or pretending establishes a positive relationship with the counselor, while validating the child's fear.

Accepting the child's point of view and exploring his/her world (Protinsky, 1985; Robinson et al., 1991) are important components of working with fearful children. Protinsky (1985) elaborated by providing an example of such acceptance. A child was experiencing, at bedtime, a fear of cows. The child feared a stampede, but when told that cows approach people in search of food, the problem was alleviated by leaving food for the cows in the child's bedroom. Upon finding

the food untouched, it was concluded, by the child, that the cows would not come into the house.

Bibliotherapy (Newhouse, 1987; Robinson et al., 1991) is another therapeutic method used with some success. Newhouse (1987) defined bibliotherapy as guided reading of literature to help children make desirable adjustments in affect and behavior, both personally and socially. Three levels of facilitation were cited: that of identification with characters in the book, catharsis upon realization that others have the same fears, and insight with the knowledge that something can be done to solve the problem.

Second graders were used as subjects in Newhouse's (1987) study; fifteen were assigned to a non-treatment control group, and fifteen were to participate in the experiment. The experimental group participated in 56 one hour bibliotherapy sessions in which books about fear-related topics were read and discussed. It was concluded that the children in the experimental group differed significantly from children in the control group related to scores on the Link Children's Fear Scale (1976, cited in Newhouse, 1987). It was noted that an earlier study by the author, utilizing only 28

one hour sessions, yielded no significant difference between the groups of children studied.

Bauer (1976) and Merritt (1991) suggested the benefit of art as a means for children to express fears. Children were more willing to admit fears that they had drawn, as opposed to those they were asked to verbalize.

Cognitive restructuring has been cited as a useful therapeutic tool. Self affirmations that verbalize the child's strengths and capabilities have been reported to be effective (Kanfer et al., 1975). Robinson et al., (1991) stated that cognitive restructuring in relation to self, as well as the fear object, helped children cope with fears. Similarly, relaxation training has helped children feel in control of fear situations (Merritt, 1991; Robinson et al., 1991). Merritt (1991) suggested that self-management in the form of self reports or self-made charts to record instances in which fear was managed positively, aided in children's control of the feared situation.

Robinson et al., (1991) hypothesized that if a specific fear is eliminated, only to be replaced by another fear, self worth, security, and control may be the important issues, rather than the fear itself.

Here, the task is to facilitate the child's expansion of a sense of security and self worth, while helping the child discover control he/she has in the environment. Problem solving skills should be utilized as well.

Summary and recommendations

The survey of the literature in relation to elementary school children's developmental fears, environmental factors, and school counselor interventions, indicates that many children's fears are age related and transitory. A normative progression of fears, as opposed to phobias and anxiety, is suggested by the fact that certain fear objects occur at about the same time for all children and then are replaced by other fear objects later in a child's life. Further, the nature of the fear objects at a given age appear to be related to other aspects of the child's development, i.e., cognitive development. Developmental fears progress from the generalized to the specific; they change from irrational fears, based on imagination, to rational fears, based on reality.

The review of literature indicated that environmental factors do influence normative fears. Socioeconomic factors, as well as the child's sex may

make certain fears more or less stressful for a given child and determine how a specific fear is manifested. Children's fears today seem to differ from children's fears in the past. Certain aspects of our society, such as media accessibility, family disruption, and changing sex roles may account for changes in children's fear perspectives. Wolman (1978) stated that the fear of loneliness or abandonment may take various forms and that fear of being alone persists throughout childhood.

Effective personal coping resources apparently include positive self concept, independence, being able to problem solve, and having control of the fear situation (Smith et al., 1990; Wolman, 1978). Thus, counselors need to address fears, in age appropriate strategies to help children cope with fear stressors, or prevent excessive reaction to them.

Knowledge about developmental fears will serve as a framework from which counselors can facilitate children's coping abilities. Consultation with parents and teachers will further this goal.

Directions for future research might address contemporary topics such as AIDS and how the disease may impact children's fears. In addition, longitudinal

studies may contribute to knowledge of developmental characteristics that contribute to the changing nature of children's fears, with particular emphasis on cognitive processes. This author found no research in relation to the use of group counseling and how it might contribute to empowering children to deal with their fears. This might also be an important area for research.

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