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ABSTRACT

Analyzed were the self reported fears of 83 educable mentally retarded (EMR), 32 trainable mentally retarded (TMR), 19 learning disabled, and 22 normal children (all between the ages of 6 and 19 years). Ss were individually asked, "What are the things to be afraid of?", and answers were grouped into the following categories: animals, people, dark, spooks, natural hazards, machinery, death and injury, and miscellaneous. Results indicated a larger proporation of realistic fears among EMR and TMR Ss than expected, similar developmental trends (increasing fears of personal injury or death) when Ss of similar mental age were compared, and a wider range of reported fears for exceptional than for normal children. (DB)

CHILDREN'S FEARS: A DEVELOPMENTAL COMPARISON OF NORMAL AND EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN[1]

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Fear, one of man's most common emotional reactions, appears to be a normal response to an active or imagined threat and comprises both psychological and physiological changes. The psychological literature has clearly indicated the existence of substantial individual differences between people in the ease with which they acquire new fears, their psychological and physiological indices, and the persistence in which fears endure (Rachman, 1974). However, some clearly defined reactions to stimuli which induce phobic responses in individuals are readily observable. Bodily reactions often include several of the following responses: hypertension, rapid respiration, sweating, pallor, pupillary dilation, nausea, terror, trembling, muscular contractions, involuntary excretions, sensations of faintness and falling, dryness of the mouth. Individuals experiencing a severe phobic reaction may withdraw (or wish to do so) from the situation or may feel incapable of movement and remain motionless. Facial expressions may include evidence of tension, staring, pallor, anguish and trembling (Marks, 1969; Rachman, 1974).

The study of fear has focused on the interaction of three phenomena: those which are innate, those dependent upon maturational processes, and those developed through learning.

While childhood fears are highly unpredictable, and at different age levels marked individual differences in susceptibility to fear occurs (Jersild & Holmes, 1935), several theoretical explanations have been provided accounting for the acquisition of such fears. Freudian and psychoanalytical theory concludes that children's fears are firmly rooted in their emotional involvement with their parents (Freud, 1925; Josselyn, 1962). A Jungian interpretation would suggest that fear is an expression of the collective unconscious. Jung suggested that a child goes through a stage that he outgrows as he matures into succeeding phases of the ontogentic recapitulation of his race (Jung, 1962). Animal studies (e.g. Hebb, 1946; Masserman, 1962; Melzack, Penick & Beckett, 1959) would lend support for such an interpretation.

The behaviourist position holds that fears are conditioned responses based upon associational ties with an innate fear (or later, on which has previously been conditioned to an innate fear) which are present at birth. This theoretical position emphasizes learning, unlearning, and modifications through environmental experiences (Watson, 1919; 1928; 1959). Gesell, Ilg, Ames and other maturational theorists have based their ideas on the primacy of growth in physical and cognitive functions. They conclude that as the child matures and his cognitive capabilities increase, the child seems to go through a series of fears which appear at certain ages and later disappear. Children in certain age groups (i.e. ages 6, 7, 10) are reported to have more fears than others (i.e. ages 5,8,9). Each age group is said to bring about its own characteristic fears (Gesell & Amatruda, 1941; Ilg & Ames, 1951).

The results of several empirical studies (Derevensky, 1974; Jersild & Holmes, 1935; Maurer, 1965) contain some support for each of the major theoretical propositions. Jersild and Holmes (1935) using subjects ranging in age from one month to 71 months found infants to be fearful of loud noises; falling; stange objects, situations and persons; and pain. In addition, they found that specific fear of animals increases during the second and third year of life but begins to decline during the school years.

Maurer (1965) using 112 children (ages 5-14) found that 80 percent of children age five and six reply to the question "What are the things to be afraid of?" by naming one or more wild animals. Sixty percent of children between ages seven and twelve answer similarly but after age twelve this response is rare. One third of all children under seven admitted to fear of imaginary beings (monsters mainly) and a fifth of them fear the dark. Both of these replies dropping off sharply after age seven (concrete operational period). In addition she found that as children mature, the types of things they regard as frightening become diverse, unique and are often tied directly or indirectly to their central concern. However, Maurer found that the things young children are taught to fear (e.g. traffic, germs, kidnappers) are rarely mentioned. She concluded that as the child matures, fears fasten upon more realistic objects, this fear dependent upon experiential learning rather than upon instruction. In a similar study, Derevensky (1974) found that the fear of animals was not as pronounced as in Maurer's (1965) research and that the fear of animals is fairly consistent between the ages of six and ten and then decreases for children ages eleven and twelve. It was concluded that approximately 78 percent of all responses are ones which are "real" fears (not imaginary) and probably taught to them by parents, teachers, and through experience. In addition, it was found that as children mature, their fears become tied directly or indirectly to their central concern, a major concern dealing with death and personal injury.

The primary purpose of the present study was to ascertain the fears of three groups of exceptional children (Educable Mentally Retarded, Trainable Mentally Retarded and Specific Learning Disabilities), to examine developmental trends and to compare their responses to those found in normal children.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 133 children of whom 82 were classified as Educable Mentally Retarded (E.M.R.) (53 males, 29 females); 32 were classified as Trainable Mentally Retarded (T.M.R.) (17 males, 15 females); and 19 were classified as Specific Learning Disabilities (S.L.D.) (16 males, 3 females). Subjects who were classified as E.M.R. (I.Q. range 50-80; mean I.Q. = 72) and those classified as T.M.R. (I.Q. range 30-55; mean I.Q. = 47) were enrolled in regular attendance at two schools for the Mentally Retarded and Emotionally Disturbed in Montreal. Subjects classified as S.L.D. (I.Q. range 90-110) were in regular attendance in Special Education classes (S.L.D.) in four elementary schools in Montreal.

Insert Table I about here

The number of responses ranged from zero to twenty-two. The average number of responses for the E.M.R. children was 7.91, the T.M.R. children 12.44, and the S.L.D. children 7.32. Inspection of the data showed boys tend to have a greater number of responses than girls and that older children tend to have fewer responses than younger children.

Procedure

Each child was taken into a quiet room where he was engaged in friendly conversation. After the child appeared to be relaxed in the new setting, the examiner queried, "What are the things to be afraid of?" Each answer was recorded on a tape recorder which was clearly visible and answers were later transcribed verbatim. Each child was assured that his answers were confidential. Silent approval and recognition that the fears were legitimate were given by a sympathetic nod. When the child stopped speaking he was encouraged to go on with questions such as "And what else?" and "Anything else?" If a child did not given an answer, no attempt was made to ask further questions. The direct question, "What are you afraid of?" was not used because children might have regarded this as a form of criticism and may have tended to reply with defensive answers. This method of ascertaining children's fears has been successful (Derevensky, 1974; Maurer, 1965) and it would appear from the work of Griffiths and Joy (1971) among others that self-report data can provide a useful if crude basis for prediction of fear and have many practical advantages over more elaborate techniques of assessment. Two female interviwers were used in all cases. The interviewer ascertained the sex and age of each subject, thanked the children and concluded the interview. Biographical data including the child's I. Q. score, his specific diagnosis and any other pertinent information was ascertained though official records and teacher interviews.

Categories of responses were set up according to those used by Derevensky (1974) which were adapted and modified from research by Maurer (1965). These categories were:

Animals - includes naming animals in general or one or more specific animals including: alligator, bear, bat, bee, bobcat, butterfly,cheetah, chickens, cow, clam, crocodile, dog, elephant, horse, leopard, lion, mice, monkey, mosquito, octopus, rhinoceros, shark, snake, spider, wasp, whale and wolf.

People - includes naming people in general or specific people including: bad men, bullies, kidnappers, doctors, dentists, robbers, scary people, teachers, parents, older children and thieves.

Dark - includes responses such as dark, walking on road when it is dark, and shadows at night.

Spooks - includes monsters, ghosts, mummies, haunted houses, vampires, dinosaurs, werewolves, skeleton and spooks.

Natural Hazards-includes storms, fire, water, flood, volcanoes, heights, hurricanes, avalanche, earthquake, quicksand, thunder and lightning.

Machinery - includes all man-made gadgets and inventions such as weapons (guns, knives, bombs), cars, trucks, trains, construction, airplanes, electricity, explosions, hatchet, boat, submarine and spaceships.

Death and Injury - includes responses as getting hurt, death, cutting a finger, operations, people getting hurt, falling, from high places, dying, stepping on thumbtacks and hurting one's head.

Miscellaneous - includes responses such as war, punishment, doing something wrong, bad dreams, scary movies, inanimate objects (e.g. numbers, puzzles, chalkboard), being made fun of, crossing street, crying, etc.

RESULTS

Based upon the information from previous research, it was expected that a large percentage of responses could be categorized as animals and that responses to the question "What are the things to be afraid of?"could be a function of one's maturational and intellectual development. Percentages of responses for each category (i.e. animals, people, dark etc.) were computed for all groups (see Table 2). The method of computation includes calculating the total number

Insert Table 2 about here

of responses in each category divided by the total number of responses elicited.

From the data obtained, the total percentages for each category appears to be fairly consistent between populations with the exception of those in the S.L.D. group which show a marked increase in the categories "animals" and "spooks" and a decrease in the categories "people","machinery" and "death and injury". This difference may be due to the small population, and/or the limited age range of the children. Compared to children in a normal setting, E.M.R. and T.M.R. children exhibit a greater percentage of responses in the category animals and a smaller percentage of responses indicating fear of people and nat al hazards.

An examination of the developmental trends for the various groups yielded some surprising results. The developmental changes in the types of fears reported by E.M.R. children can be seen in Table 3. Fear of animals tends to

Insert Table 3 about here

decrease with age, however, the percentage of children fearing animals appears to be significantly greater than those reported by "normal" children (See Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Eighty-five percent of all E.M.R. children age seven and eight reported having a fear of animals, this fear decreasing steadily as children get older. This trend appears to be similar with T.M.R. children (See Table 5) and S.L.D.

Insert Table 5 about here

children (See Table 6). Fear of animals was the response most often made

Insert Table 6 about here

for all children. The most unpopular animal is the snake. Next in order came lions, tigers, dogs, cats and bees with animals classified as reptiles, insects and rodents getting a large percentage of responses. Little differentiation can be found between the responses of older and younger children. Older children failed to qualify their responses. The fear of animals appears to be much more widespread amongst the E.M.R. children (Table 3), the T.M.R. children (Table 5) and the S.L.D. children (Table 6) than amongst the normal children (Table 4).

Responses in the category "people" appear to reflect the current trend of crime in North America. The most predominant reply involved "people who... rob you, scare you, get angry, yell at you , fight with you," etc., or specific persons. A large number of children responded by saying "kidnappers," "strangers", "killers", and "robbers". An unusually large number of exceptional children responded by specifically naming doctors, dentists, teachers and parents. This occurrence was quite rare in the response of normal children. Older children tended to be more concerned with "kidnappers," "people who take advantage of you" and "burglars." Fifty percent of all E.M.R. children, fourty percent of all T.M.R. children, fifty-three percent of al' S.L.D. children and thirty-five percent of all normal children responded with answers which were classified in the category people. A child hears repeatidly "don't take rides with strangers", "don't leave any money in your desk," "don't let anyone in the house until you are certain you know them" etc. Similar statements tend to reinforce the child's fear as well as the fears he may acquire from identification and modeling his parents and teachers who are terribly concerned with theft, kidnapping and assault. With the ever increasing rate of crime in major Metropolitan cities, and the attention and emphasis provided in the mass media and classroom, this finding was not unexpected.

Fear of the dark is strongest amongst the T.M.R. children (25 percent). Even when analyzing the fear responses to darkness by mental age for the E.M.R. and T.M.R. children (see Table 7) a significantly larger percentage of these

Insert Table 7 about here

children appear to fear being alone in the dark than normal children (see Table 4).For E.M.R. and T.M.R. children a marked decrease appears to occur after mental age five and six and then remains fairly constant from mental age seven through fifteen. Although no further questions were asked of the children, it was felt that the responses in the category "dark" for older children were related to fear of being attacked by people in the "dark" and not the fear of dark per se. Fear of spooks and the supernatural is highest among the S.L.D. children (14 percent) followed by the T.M.R. children (11 percent), the E.M.R. children (9 percent) and normal children (6 percent). The fear of spooks and the supernatural appears to be fairly consistent for E.M.R. children from age seven through fourteen and then drops significantly. A large percentage of responses in this category included "monsters", "witches", and "ghosts." No plausible explanation can be provided for the unusually high percentage of subjects who responded with answers within this category.

In the category "natural hazards", the answer received most frequently was "fires". Several children responded "earthquakes," volcanoes" and "thunder and lightening." This type of fear (fire) is often the traditional example used to provide evidence that children learn through experiences as well as by instruction. Children who have been taught to fear fire, or who may have been burnt by fire or a match would be expected to respond in this manner. While the percentages of responses within this category for the E.M.R. children (Table 3) appears greater than that of the normal children (Table 4) the total percent of all responses is less (see Table 2), thus indicating the fear of natural hazards to be more widespread among E.M.R. children. In addition, if one examines the data for the E.M.R. and T.M.R. children by mental age (see Table 7) the developmental trend appears similar to that of normal children (Table 4) but again more widespread.

"Machinery" included all man-made gadgets and inventions, such as weapons (guns, knives, bombs) cars, trucks, airplanes, trains, construction, explosions, etc. S.L.D. children appear to respond least often (6 percent) with E.M.R., T.M.R. and normal children responding similarly (see Table 2). Developmental trends for E.M.R. and T.M.R. children are not as clearly delineable as those of normal children. The predominant response in this category was "cars," "trucks," "buses", "guns," "knives," "electric wires," and"machines." Older children tended to qualify their responses by phrases such as "getting hit by a truck", "getting hit by a car","getting stabbed with a knife." Within this category, for older children, the emphasis was on violent weapons (i.e. guns, knives and bombs).

"Death and Injury" as a category received the second largest number of responses for both E.M.R. (13 percent) and T.M.R. children (13 percent). Forty-three percent of all E.M.R. children and forty-one percent of all T.M.R. children emitted responses in this category. This compared with 18 percent for normal children and 17 percent for S.L.D. children. If one was to add to "Death and Injury" some responses made in the category "machinery" (such as "hit by a car" "hit by a truck," "being stabbed with a knife") we would find that combined, this would approximate or supercede the fear of animals, thus becoming the major fear for most children. This is a most significant finding. While the fear of animals is "somewhat imaginary" (especially in the cases of caged animals in our society) the fear of injury and death is not. In addition, the finding that the fear of E.M.R. and T.M.R. children is more widespread than amongst children with normal intelligence is most interesting. It appears quite plausible that their experiential background and learning environment has reinforced this concept.

An indepth analysis of the responses within the category of animals revealed that a large percentage of these responses can be considered "real" fears. This is not meant to indicate that other responses do not represent "real" fears, but that it is highly unlikely that a child would ever encounter specific animals (e.g. lions, tigers, etc.) unless in a zoo or circus where such animals are caged. The responses which were considered to represent a "real" fear are those animals which a child may encounter within his environment. Thus "real" fears included responses such as "dog," "horses," "cats," "bees," "wasps," "snakes," "insects," "rats," "animals," and "wild animals." Since "animals" and "wild animals" fail to indicate which animals are being referred to, these responses were included in subsequent calculations as "real" fears. It was found that 68 percent of the animal responses for normal children could be categorized as real fears, 60 percent for E.M.R. children, 58 percent for T.M.R. children and 51 percent for S.L.D. children. Thus, less than 50 percent of all animals mentioned would be seen on a street within a large city (i.e. bears, lions, tigers, etc.) In addition, responses in specific categories, (i.e. animals) tend to lend themselves to a perseveration effect. Upon analysis of the data, it was found that when children began naming one animals as a fear they continued and mentioned several. Data from a previous study (Derevensky, 1974) indicated that his perseveration effect could greatly influence the number of responses within a category.

Of great importance to the present study is the suggestion that E.M.R. and T.M.R. children tend to have unrealistic and imaginary fears. However, this was found not be the case. This can be demonstrated by adding the total percentage of responses which might subjectively have a "real" reason to be feared. This would include that percentage of responses within the category "animals" which the child might encounter, the categories "people," natural hazards," 'machinery," death and injury" and particular responses from the category "miscellaneous." The total percentage of "real" fears for normal children is 78 percent; for E.M.R. children 67 percent; for T.M.R. children 65 percent ; and for S.L.D. children 53 percent. This is also a function of one's developmental level, with older children tending to respond with more "real" fears. Therefore, many of the fears exceptional children emit tend to be similar to those of normal children; are "real"; are developmental in nature; and are most probably taught to them by parents, teachers and experience.

DISCUSSION

The relatively large number of responses to the question, "What are the things to be afraid of?" by E.M.R., T.M.R., and S.L.D. children was somewhat surprising. However, the percentages of responses were quite similar across student populations; developmental trends were similar; and when Mental Age was calculated for the E.M.R. and T.M.R. children, their developmental trends closely approximated those of the normal children. Another very significant finding in the present study was that most fears emitted by exceptional children are widespread. That is, in addition to responding more frequently than normal children, exceptional children tend to have a much wider range of reported fears. In each age group, the percentage of exceptional children who replied that things to be be afraid of classifiable under the specific categories of fear, was significantly greater than for normal children.

Children within the S.L.D. group tended to be most irregular in their response patterns. This may be due to the small number of subjects tested (N= 19), and the limited age range (8-12). Further investigation into the fears of S.L.D. children is warranted.

The things children are taught to fear (burglars, traffic, strangers, fires and kidnappers) both at home and school, as well as the high crime rate in many Metropolitan areas appears to have a direct affect upon the fears of children. As children mature, they become more fearful of personal injury and death. Their fears are not unrealistic nor are most of them imaginary in nature. The fears are learned, they are dependent upon the child's intellectual and maturational level and appear to be a direct result of their personal experiences and the lessons taught by parents, teachers and the peer group.

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Table 1

Subjects in the Study by Age and Placement

AGE	E.M.R.	T.M.R.	S.L.D.	Total
7 & 8	13	0	2	15
9 & 10	29	2	11	42
11 & 12	27	4	6	37
13 & 14	7	8	0	15
15 - 19	6	18	0	24
Total	82	32	19	133

Table 2

Percent of Responses by Student Population

Student Population	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneou
Normal[1]	106	30	16	5	6	10	12	11	9
E.M.R.	82	44	12	2	9	6	10	13	4
T.M.R.	32	35	9	2	11	7	11	13	12
S.L.D.	19	58	6	3	14	6	6	3	4

[1] This data was obtained from a study by Derevensky (1974) using 106 children in regular attendance at an elementary school in a middle class suburb of Montreal.

Table 3

Subject Matter of Fears - E.M.R. Children

Percentages*

Age	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneous
7 & 8	13	85	31	8	46	38	31	46	8
9 & 10	29	66	41	10	55	17	21	28	21
11 & 12	27	63	44	15	30	33	19	33	11
13 & 14	7	57	71	57	43	57	43	57	29
15 - 19	6	50	67	17	0	50	33	50	33

*In each group, the percentage of subjects who replied to at least one of the things to be afraid of were such as to be calssifiable under the categories.

Table 4

Subject Matter of Fears - Normal Children[1]

Percentages*

Age	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneous
6	22	32	32	0	23	14	14	0	4
7 & 8	25	40	40	0	8	12	8	16	0
9 & 10	31	39	23	13	6	23	16	12	23
11 & 12	28	29	46	32	0	21	36	44	20

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied to at least one of the things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

[1]Data reprinted from McGill Journal of Education, 1974, 9 , 77-85.

Table 5

Subject Matter of Fears - T.M.R. Children

Percentages*

Age	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneous
10	2	100	50	0	0	0	50	0	0
11 & 12	4	75	50	25	75	0	25	25	50
13 & 14	8	50	25	50	75	50	75	63	38
15 & 16	6	100	33	33	66	0	33	33	17
17 - 19	12	42	42	17	25	33	58	42	58

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied that at least one of things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

Table 6

Subject Matter of Fears - S.L.D. Children

Percentages*

Age	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneous
8	2	100	100	0	50	0	0	0	50
9 & 10	11	64	27	18	55	27	0	18	18
11 & 12	6	67	33	17	50	0	50	33	33

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied that at least one of the things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

Table 7

Subject Matter of Fears Tabulated by Mental Age for E.M.R. and T.M.R. Children

Percentages*

Age	N	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Machinery	Death & Injury	Miscellaneous
5 & 6	15	87	33	67	40	33	33	40	67
7 & 8	38	44	39	20	61	22	32	34	27
9 & 10	30	70	42	18	36	27	21	33	12
11 & 12	25	52	40	25	24	36	40	40	36
13 - 15	6	50	67	17	17	33	33	50	33

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied that at least one of the things to be afraid of were such as to be classified under the categories.