

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 059

PS 017 599

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 TITLE Joys and Fears. Set Research Information for Teachers. Number One, Item 11.
 INSTITUTION Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn.; New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington.
 PUB DATE 88
 NOTE 7p.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Influences; *Emotional Experience; *Ethnicity; *Fear; Foreign Countries; Research Methodology; *Sex Differences; *Young Children
 IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Happiness

ABSTRACT

Data were obtained from 183 Australia-area children between 5- and 8-years-old who were asked questions about what makes them happy, laugh, frightened, and scared. Children who were selected according to ethnicity, were of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or European descent. Children were interviewed outside schools, on buses, at church, in parks, at the homes of friends and neighbors, in shopping centers, streets, and at a day care center. Responses were first collated into sex, age, and descent categories, and then into topic-based categories. Ten categories of fears, and nine categories of joys emerged. Children were afraid of bedtime and the dark, imaginary and supernatural creatures, physical harm, certain programs on television, separation from family, practical difficulties, and nothing. Children's happiness resulted from funny actions, celebrations, toys, school, friends, physical activity, television, being with family, food, and money. Cultural trends, age trends, and sex differences are discussed in relation to data, which are presented in 10 tables. Concluding remarks reflect on the research process and indicate the effects of the project on the researchers. (RH)

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Joys and Fears

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ED 299059

PS 014599



Sally McAra

OUTSIDE SCHOOLS, on buses, at church, in parks, in the homes of friends and neighbours, in shopping centres, in the street, and in a day-care centre we asked young children about their joys and fears. Back in our Diploma of Teaching (2nd Year) class we recorded and quantified and graphed and analysed the replies. Our main conclusion is that urbanised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have not lost their culture, despite outward appearances, and

every teacher with culturally different pupils in her class *must* assume that they live very different lives, with very different views of what life is all about, very different hopes, fears, joys, expectations, and needs in school. The item is about how we found this out, and how we realised that our own discoveries are more important than second-hand knowledge.

The Topic

The *Joys and Fears of Childhood* was chosen because of its interest, and because it captures significant features of the behaviour and development of the child of 5-8 years. Also, a substantial amount of research has already been conducted on this age. The topic reinforced some knowledge we had already gained and gave us the opportunity to challenge and test information in popular literature and text books.

The Process

We all collected tape recordings and made transcriptions of what each child said when we asked these four questions.

- Joys** What makes you happy?
 What makes you laugh?
- Fears** What makes you frightened?
 What makes you scared?

In small groups and in sessions all together we collated the information, put it in categories, compared and contrasted the ideas, and listed the trends.

We also read a great deal about children's social and emotional development, especially chapters relating to joys and fears and prepared a detailed bibliography and a review of the important articles.

At the end we reflected on the project and wrote an article which appeared in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

The Sample

We spent a considerable time trying to decide how to select children to interview according to their descent, Aboriginal, Islander or European. We worked hard to clarify what we meant by these categories.

We sampled children in various places: outside schools, on buses, at church, in parks, in the home of friends and neighbours, in shopping centres, in the street, and in a day-care centre. A total of 203 children between 5- and 8-years-old were interviewed, but a total of 183 responses were used. Those not used were maudible, or responses which were not appropriate, e.g., 'daddy's at work'. Many of the children gave very full answers which yielded a wealth of interesting ideas, but for the statistical part of the project the child's first sentence was used as the response.

At first the sampling appeared to have uneven numbers of children in the descent groups as those of us who are Aboriginals collected a large number of responses from Aboriginal children. However, when all the responses were tallied this was balanced by the high number of responses from Islander children to those of us who are Islanders.

Findings

All the children's responses were collated into sex, age and descent categories.

Then, from the responses, we placed the comments into categories based on topics. It was fascinating to see trends emerging from the massive amount of raw data. And we could often recall individual children's manners and attitudes as their responses were read.

The responses were placed in ten categories for Fears and nine for Joys.

Fears

Of the dark 'When it is dark.' 'At night when I have to go to the toilet in the dark.' 'Walking into a dark, dark room.' 'When the light goes out.'

Bedtime fears 'When I dream terrible dreams.' 'Nightmares.' 'When there are scary things in my bedroom.' 'Weird sounds at night.' 'When I hear sounds at night and noises.' 'When I'm in bed at night I dream there is someone there who is going to kill me.' 'Sleeping by myself.'

Imaginary creatures (monsters) 'Monsters.' 'Monsters and ghosts - especially the screaming ones.' 'Monsters with ugly faces.'

Supernatural (ghosts - devils) 'Ghosts.' 'A devil dog.' 'Devils.' 'Toads and snakes.' 'When I am a bad girl and mum sends the devil to me.' 'Bushes that rattle when the wind is not blowing.' 'The devil with the red eyes.' 'The boogey man when I am out on my own.' 'The devil man in the dark.' 'When mummy says the devil man is in the corner.'

Personal physical harm (including punishment) 'When daddy hits me.' 'If I hurt myself.' 'Someone with an axe who is going to kill me.' 'When dad hits me when I muck up.' 'Getting a beating from mum and dad.' 'Getting into trouble.'

TV and mass media 'Scary movies.' 'Creature feature called Spiders.' 'When I watch movies where people are killed.' 'Sharks and vampire movies.' 'When there were wolves come out and there is a full moon.'

Separation from family 'When mummy and daddy talk loud and daddy goes away from me.' 'When my grandma dies.' 'When mummy forgets me at school.' 'I'm scared when I'm by myself.' 'When I'm left by myself.' 'When my daddy leaves us for a week.' 'Being alone.'

Factual fantasy, e.g., man-made fantasy 'When I wake up and see my dress hanging on the wall.' 'The big scary house at the Show' (the ghost train at Townsville Show). 'When I see myself in the mirror and think it is someone else.' 'When my uncle scared me with a scary mask.' 'Frights and tricks.'

Practical fears 'If I lost my watch - I'd be in strife.' 'When the big plane flies over my house.' 'When I crash on my bike.' 'Feeling sick.' 'If a stranger took me away.' 'Fire and fireworks.' 'Drunken people.' 'Drunken men fighting each other.' 'Running out of petrol with our car.' 'A big dog barking.'

Nothing 'Nothing.' 'I'm not scared of anything.' 'Nothing - I'm tough.'

Joys

Funny actions 'Tickles.' 'When people do funny things.' 'Fun things.' 'When mummy tickles me.' 'When people say funny jokes.' 'Reading funny stories.' 'Clowns.'

Celebrations 'Father Christmas and people that are happy.' 'Birthdays.' 'When mum gives me a surprise birthday.' 'Singing church choruses.' 'When mummy baked me a big birthday cake.' 'When I'm invited to a party.'

Toys 'A dolly, a book and a pencil.' 'When my mum buys me stuff like shoes and toys.' 'Playing colouring-ins.' 'Dressing up in mum's clothes.' 'My cabbage patch doll.' 'My bike.' 'My cars.' 'A toy gun for a present from my dad.' 'A remote-controlled car.'

School 'When I get a medal or something at school.' 'When I get all my tests right.' 'Making things and doing puzzles'

at school.' 'When I go to a new school.' 'When I get my homework and tables right.'

Friends 'Playing with other people who are happy.' 'When I play with my friends.' 'Playing, having fun and messing around with my friends.' 'Sleeping over at Sharon's place.' 'Going to Jerry's place - Jerry makes me laugh.'

Physical activity 'Swimming.' 'Singing' 'Playing with my dog.' 'Fishing.' 'Swings and playing in the park.'

TV 'It's a Knockout, and cartoons.' 'Funny things on television.' 'Watching Inspector Gadget.' 'Fat Cat when he dances.'

Being with family 'When mummy comes home.' 'Visiting grandma.' 'When my mummy helps me look at and bath my baby sister.' 'When daddy takes me to the pool.' 'Going with Grampy.' 'Going fishing at Magnetic Island with dad.' 'Seeing all my cousins at Christmas at Yorke Island.' 'Mum and dad when they play with me.'

Food and money 'Lollies.' 'Biscuits.' 'Eating ice cream, Weet Bix, cake.' 'Money.' 'Money and chocolates and presents.'

The Statistical Results

The trends which are listed under the tables emerged from our discussion as we assembled the tables. Although these trends are specific to our findings, it may provide some interesting research areas for others. The tables show:

Table 1
Cultural Trends - Girls Joys (percentages)

	European	Aboriginal	Islander
Toys	24	4	32
Funny Actions	16	27	4
Celebrations	13	14	14
School	5	9	0
Friends	13	9	14
Physical Activity	13	9	4
TV	0	4	0
Family	13	24	32
Food	3	0	0
Money	0	0	0

Table 1: The Aboriginal descent groups did not register a high response in the 'toy' category. The 'family' figures are very high for Islander and Aboriginal girls and when combined with 'friends' and 'celebrations' indicates a very strong sense of happiness generated from close personal networks.

Table 2
Cultural Trends - Boys Joys (percentages)

	European	Aboriginal	Islander
Funny Actions	12	11	5
Celebrations	12	7	5
Toys	32	15	43
School	2	11	0
Friends	5	7	9
Physical Activity	7	7	9
TV	13	7	0
Family	15	29	24
Food	2	3	0
Money	0	3	5

Table 2: TV figures are higher for European children. In discussion it was decided that socio-economic factors were not significant in this, as all the children came from urban Townsville and shared similar material standards across the cultural groups. Significant was the revelation that 'family' figures were high, as it reinforced our own feelings of 'oneness' within family experience. Toys were high for all groups.

Table 3
Age Trends - Girls Joys (frequency order)

5 Years	6 Years	7 Years	8 Years
Actions	Family	Family	Toys
Family	Toys	Toys	Friends
Toys	Actions	Friends	Celebrations
Celebrations	Celebrations	Celebrations	Actions
Physical	School	Physical	Family
School	Physical	Actions	School
Friends	Friends	Food	Physical
TV	TV	School	TV
Food	Food	TV	Food
Money	Money	Money	Money

Table 3: This shows the priority ordering of children's responses in categories according to age. For example, the most frequent response to the question 'what makes you happy?' of five year old girls was 'Funny Actions (tricks, jokes and tickles)'. Whilst eight year old girls responded that 'Toys' were a source of happiness. Overall, 'Funny Actions', 'Toys', 'Family' and 'Celebrations' increase with age, as does the eight year olds' investment in friendships. It is significant that 'TV', 'Food' and 'Money' were not frequent initial responses.

Table 4
Age Trends - Boys Joys (frequency order)

5 Years	6 Years	7 Years	8 Years
Toys	Toys	Toys	Family
Family	Family	Friends	Celebrations
Actions	Actions	Family	Toys
Physical	TV	Celebrations	Actions
TV	Physical	School	School
School	Celebrations	Physical	Physical
Friends	School	Food	TV
Celebrations	Friends	Actions	Money
Food	Food	TV	Food
Money	Money	Money	Friends

Table 4: This table lists priority of responses for boys. It revealed that 'Toys' were high for 5, 6, 7 Years, and drops off at 8. The 'Family' was a high category in all ages, which increases for 8s. Perhaps in conjunction with that 'Celebrations' are also high for 8-year-olds. It is interesting that 'Money' is an interest of 8-year-olds. We were surprised that 'Physical Activity' was not high at any age. It could be that the nature of the question 'What makes you happy?' makes for an object or emotion as a response, or perhaps there is a genuine lack of pleasure in physical activity? This would be an area for future research.

Table 5
Priority of Frequency of Comment
Sex Differences – Joys (percentages)

Boys		Girls	
Toys	30	Family	21
Family	21	Toys	21
Funny Actions	10	Funny actions	16
Celebrations	9	Celebrations	14
Physical activity	8	Friends	12
TV	8	Physical activity	9
Friends	6	School	5
School	4	TV	1
Food	2	Food	1
Money	2	Money	0

Table 5: Some trends we felt were interesting. The boys mentioned playing with toys more frequently than girls, whilst being with the family was significant for both. More boys mentioned 'TV' and 'Money'. The girls tallied high on 'Funny Actions' and on 'Celebrations'. 'Friends' were higher for girls than boys but both were high in 'Family', 'Toys', 'Actions', 'Celebrations', whilst both were low in 'School', 'Food', 'Money', 'TV' and 'Physical Activity'.

Table 6
Cultural Trends – Girls Fears (percentages)

	European	Islander	Aboriginal
Fear of dark	8	18	12
Bedtime fears	30	18	12
Imaginary creatures	6	4	0
Supernatural	2	27	38
Personal physical harm	2	4	8
TV mass media	24	17	4
Separation	8	4	14
Factual fantasy	4	0	4
Practical fears	12	8	4
Nothing	4	0	4

Table 6: European children appear to be much more afraid of bedtime fears, noises and nightmares and much more likely to be scared by TV and media images. They were concerned with practical fears in all ages more frequently than Aboriginal and Islander children. Of significant cultural interest is how many Aboriginal and Islander children show a fear of the supernatural. (This is expanded later.)

Table 7
Cultural Trends – Boys Fears (percentages)

	European	Islander	Aboriginal
Fear of dark	15	0	4
Bedtime fears	10	13	14
Imaginary creatures	8	4	4
Supernatural	15	41	25
Personal physical harm	5	4	13
TV and media	2	4	0
Separation	15	9	4
Factual fantasy	13	9	4
Practical fears	7	8	20
Nothing	10	8	13

Table 7: European children appear much more likely to be afraid of the dark than Aboriginal and Islander children, whilst Aboriginal and Islander children are much more likely to be afraid of the supernatural than European children, e.g., afraid of devils. The European children are more often scared by the idea of separation from the family than are Aboriginal and Islander children, but all children have bedtime fears/nightmares and are scared by the supernatural.

Table 8
Age Trends – Girls Fears (frequency order)

5-yrs	6-yrs	7-yrs	8-yrs
Dark	Supernatural	Bedtime	Bedtime
Bedtime	Separation	TV	TV
Imaginary creatures	Dark	Supernatural	Supernatural
Supernatural	Bedtime	Practical	Practical
Physical harm	TV	Dark	Separation
TV	Physical harm	Separation	Nothing
Practical	Factual	Factual	Dark
Separation	Imaginary creatures	Imaginary creatures	Imaginary creatures
Factual	Practical	Physical harm	Physical harm
Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	Factual

Table 8: Trends in this table are age-based and reflect the 5- to 7-years-old shift from fantasy to factual fears. 'Dark' and 'Bedtime Fears' are the highest source of fear for girls overall, and 'Supernatural – ghosts/spirits' were high also. For the girls 'TV' becomes increasingly a source of fear, whereas this is not so for boys. The 'Nothing' category reveals that bravado develops at 8-years in girls, whilst boys demonstrated bravado much earlier. It is interesting that 'Practical Fears' increase as a child matures and is less concerned with fantasy; for example, 'Dark' decreases but 'Bedtime Fears' increase.

Table 9
Age Trends – Boys Fears (frequency order)

5-yrs	6-yrs	7-yrs	8-yrs
Supernatural	Dark	Bedtime	Supernatural
Dark	Supernatural	Nothing	Separation
Imaginary creatures	Bedtime	Supernatural	Physical harm
Bedtime	Nothing	Practical	Practical
Physical harm	Separation	Imaginary creatures	Factual
Separation	Factual	Factual	Bedtime
Factual	Practical	Separation	TV
Practical	Imaginary creatures	Physical harm	Dark
Nothing	Physical harm	Dark	Imaginary creatures
TV	TV	TV	Nothing

Table 9: This shows again the concern about fear of the supernatural in all ages. We gained strong insights into the still fragile sense of security in young children. 'TV' did not register at all until 8-years in boys, but was a high source of fear for girls. At all ages some boys claim 'Nothing', indicating bravado. Once again, imaginary fears (dark, bedtime, monsters) decrease with age and practical fears increase. This finding confirms our current theories of cognitive development for this age group.

Table 10
Sex Differences - Fears (percentages)

Boys		Girls	
Supernatural	23	Bedtime	23
Bedtime	12	Supernatural	18
Practical fears	12	TV	16
Separation	10	Dark	11
Nothing	10	Separation	9
Factual fantasy	9	Practical fears	9
Dark	8	Physical harm	4
Physical harm	7	Imaginary creatures	4
Imaginary creatures	6	Factual fantasy	3
TV	3	Nothing	3

Table 10: This records the percentage of total responses to the questions, 'What makes you frightened?', 'What makes you scared?'. The trends show high frequency of supernatural fears and bedtime fears for both boys and girls. 'Nothing' is much higher for boys than girls. Of great import for teachers and parents is the finding that, even at the 5-, 6-, 7- and 8-year-old stage, 'separation' is a concern for 10% of all children. The consistent concern about separation, e.g., 'When mummy forgets me at school', 'Being alone', 'I'm scared when I'm by myself', highlights the need for the teacher to provide secure, reassuring learning environments which foster emotional security.

Reflecting on the Process

The last phase of the research strategy was to reflect on the project, as a group.

1. We were delighted at our achievement of creating new knowledge. There was a great feeling of power as we surveyed the results of our efforts which had created knowledge about urban Islander, Aboriginal, and European children in Townsville that was unpublished, fresh and genuine.
2. It reinforced our understanding of children of 5-to 8-years. The educational objectives had been achieved as efficiently as lecturing and, in some cases, more so.
3. We discovered text book fallibility. One of us after comparing her literature review with transcripts, said, 'My research must be wrong'. But her data was more up-to-date, fresh and accurate than the 'conventional wisdom'. The wide literature review, conducted as a group task, also revealed contradictions, generalizations and, in some cases, 'out of context' information, as well as a variety of interesting views and theories. For example:

From all the texts we have read we have concluded that studies of children aged 5 to 8 do not take into account the cultural differences relating to 'Joys and Fears' of childhood. Ausubel (1980) makes generalisations regarding fears. He believes that fear is moulded by cultural stereotyping, social expectations, traditional views and largely by what the parents or other adults believe.

4. Of great significance for those of us who are Aboriginal and Islander was the culture of urban children. At the beginning of the project we felt that urban Aboriginal and Islander children would have lost most of their cultural differences - they appeared to have adopted European type lifestyles. However, a wealth of cultural training was evident, especially in the supernatural categories. We enjoyed explaining the children's answers to the lecturer and to others in the group. There were

frequent exchanges of stories about beliefs, fears, child rearing patterns which we were able to identify in the children's responses, for example, when discussing the high rate of response in the 'separation from family' category, one of us wrote

I've experienced that two years ago when I left my daughter up in Cairns, with my sister, so that I could do this course. She was 5-years. When talking to her on the phone, the very first thing, she would question, 'Why you have to leave me up here, Mumma?' Always followed by a very soft crying voice of just a whisper, 'I miss you, Mumma'. I never knew, until I went through this research course and learnt, what separation from a mother means to a child.

When discussing the supernatural category:

In our Islander culture very young children are scared of ghosts (spirits) It was told by our ancestors that when a person died his spirit would attack people. They suggested that on the third day his spirit would walk through the villages.

To overcome this situation all the relations would stay in one particular house. The men would build a big long shed with plaited palm leaves for men to sleep in at night. The children are sleeping close to their mothers. The barking of a dog at midnight was a sign of the spirit passing by.

Also about the witchcraft, people would travel very fast by using magic words. As for our traditional laws, the young children are not allowed to be left alone in the house unless with older members of the family. Even at night at their own house they will sleep together with their parents, to avoid the presence of the sorcerers.

5. A significant discussion for us as trainee teachers focused on the implications of the research on teaching. At this stage conclusions are conjecture but they provide some ideas for future research, for example:

Boys of European descent appear to be very 'object oriented' whereas Aboriginal and Islander children frequently mentioned interpersonal relationships. Early Childhood teachers should allow children to work together with other children, and with objects, to maximise the benefits.

The Effects of the Project on us

We enjoyed the learning experience.

'The research study was something that was new to all of us, and a challenge.'

'I feel that the research was very beneficial as you learn a lot, i.e., through reading books and sharing ideas with others.'

'The strongest feature of this subject was the research of children - how we collected materials.'

'The research programme was very interesting, it should be done again.'

We felt strongly that we had produced valuable data.

We came to realise the changes in teaching style and expectation that must be made for children of different ages whilst still ensuring continuity. The project reinforced that the teacher must not underestimate the role of the parents and wider family in the experience of children, and should try to incorporate the family into the life of the school. The knowledge from lectures became relevant and practical when we applied it to the children's comments. We broadened our ability to talk with young children. And we had the experience of action research and of working as a team.

Notes:

Alison Searle at the time of this project was a lecturer in Early Childhood Education in the Department of Social and Cultural Studies in Education at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia. All the other authors were members of the 2nd year *Diploma of Teaching Class*.

The earlier account of this project was first published under the title 'Utilising a research project as a teaching/learning strategy', in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Volume 15, No. 3, June/July 1987. *The Aboriginal Child at School* is published from the Department of Education, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland 4067; Mrs D.M. Muir is the Honorary Editor; the subscription is A\$10.00.

A later account called 'A cross-cultural study of the joys and fears of young children' was published in the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, Volume 12, No. 3, September 1987. This journal is published 4 times a year by the Australian Early Childhood Association, P.O. Box 105, Watson, ACT, Australia 2602; Margaret Clyde is the editor; the subscription is A\$16.00 for Australia, A\$25.00 for overseas.

Our thanks to these journals for their help.

Further Reading

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