

Fear factors of preschool children

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Abstract

Early childhood is the period for children to be at play and in school with most of the experiences adding up to fear development in them. Most of their fears are temporary, normal or may grow over time. However some fears do not; and even the evaded fears causes residual agony for their life time. Hence this study made an attempt to explore the gender specific and age specific differences of about twenty major fears factors prevailing among the preschool children with an ultimate purpose of finding the cures to the causes that fears them. Multi stage sampling along with k in 10 sampling was adopted with certain inclusion criteria to identify eighty preschool children with the age group of 4-6 years. The fear intensity was appraised with a five point fears inventory. The data revealed that every preschool child had fear for all the identified fear factors but in varying degree. The highest feared aspect was towards natural disaster irrespective of gender. Whereas other fears had remarkable gender specific differences. However except for the fear towards person, monster and natural disaster, age didn't influence the intensity of the fears.

Keywords: fear among preschool children, gender specific differences, age specific differences on fear

1. Introduction

Fear is an intense aversion to or apprehension of a person, place, activity, event, or object that causes emotional distress and often avoidance behavior. All children encompass fear at some point of lives. Though, early fears are transitory, usual and outgrown eventually, the fear residue do have an impact on the normal development of children. It has to be realized that the period of 4-6 years is a time of intensive growth and development for children, and are characterized by intense activity and discovery. Hence this study focused to explore fears among preschool children as there was a great saying that prevention is better than cure in order to cope up with the fears they mostly feel during later stages of their life. With this background the current study on exploring fear factors among preschool children gains importance in three ways. First one is that to devise a tool through which the various types of fear were addressed in such a way that the child reports to every fear by himself or herself.

The second way of importance to the current study was that to explore the level of various types of fear present among the kindergarten children, so that the causes of fear could be traced. There by, helping to formulate coping mechanisms for them. Moreover, the third rationale behind the current study was to explore the theory that states that fear varies with age.

A collated literature on fear of preschool children revealed twenty major fears prevailing in them namely fear to animals and reptiles, person, going to school/school refusal, sudden shocking incident, loneliness, place, criticism or teasing, new situation, night time/ bedtime, monsters and ghosts, death and injury, transports, doctor, dentist, playing games, toilet training, illness, social fear and natural disasters. The study was carried out with the objectives of

- Exploring the gender specific differences on the fear factors among preschool children.
- Appraising the age specific difference on the fear factors among preschool children.

2. Methodology

A survey research of multi-stage sampling design was adopted with certain inclusion criteria in identifying preschools within the semi urban limits of Coimbatore city. With series of short listing two schools were identified and k in 8 sampling technique was implemented, wherein 80 preschool children were roped in for the study. A set of tools namely questionnaire to procure general and personal profile and second a five-point rating scale to secure adequate data on twenty fear factors and its sub factors were formulated.

Adequate information was secured from the identified preschool children. However, as the age of the children was too small to understand the depth of the questions. The rating scale was filled up by the investigator herself after observing the children's activity and responses to certain situations and contexts. For this purpose, the investigator framed certain short stories, vignettes, questions and even extempore way in the children of expressing their attitudes towards certain factors.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 General profile of the respondents

- Out of the 80 children selected through multistage sampling, the highest percentages of them (37.5%) were from six years of age, followed by four and five years (31.3% each) with equal representation.
- More than half of the preschool children engrossed for the study were girls (51.2%) which brought out the changed scenario from the olden days wherein more boys were enrolled for school education.

3.2 Ranking the fear factors as per the gender of the identified preschool children

The Table 1 depicts the list of twenty fears in accordance with their ranking of affecting the preschoolers in relation to their gender

Table 1: Gender specific differences in ranking the fear factors

| S. No | Categories of fear | Gender | | | | Overall | |
|-------|--|--------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| | | Boys | | Girls | | Mean | Rank |
| | | Mean | Rank | Mean | Rank | | |
| 1 | Fear of animals and reptiles | 15.85 | 20 | 19.49 | 13 | 17.71 | 19 |
| 2 | Fear towards the person | 20.46 | 8 | 21.10 | 9 | 20.79 | 7 |
| 3 | Fear of going to school/school refusal | 19.46 | 12 | 17.85 | 20 | 18.64 | 15 |
| 4 | Fear of sudden shocking incident | 22.90 | 5 | 24.20 | 2 | 23.56 | 3 |
| 5 | Fear of loneliness | 23.28 | 4 | 22.80 | 5 | 23.04 | 5 |
| 6 | Fear of places | 19.49 | 11 | 20.83 | 11 | 20.18 | 11 |
| 7 | Fear of criticism or teasing | 16.10 | 19 | 19.02 | 16 | 17.60 | 20 |
| 8 | Fear of new situation | 16.69 | 18 | 19.29 | 15 | 18.03 | 17 |
| 9 | Fear of night time/bedtime | 19.69 | 10 | 21.27 | 8 | 20.50 | 9 |
| 10 | Fear of imaginary creatures | 18.79 | 14 | 21.34 | 7 | 20.10 | 12 |
| 11 | Fear of monsters and ghosts | 21.95 | 6 | 21.76 | 6 | 21.85 | 6 |
| 12 | Fear of death and injury | 21.62 | 7 | 19.37 | 14 | 20.46 | 10 |
| 13 | Fear of transports | 17.13 | 17 | 18.39 | 19 | 17.78 | 18 |
| 14 | Fear of doctor | 25.33 | 2 | 23.32 | 3 | 24.30 | 2 |
| 15 | Fear of dentist | 23.49 | 3 | 23.05 | 4 | 23.26 | 4 |
| 16 | Fear of playing games/objects | 17.41 | 16 | 18.88 | 17 | 18.16 | 16 |
| 17 | Fear of toilet training | 19.18 | 13 | 18.66 | 18 | 18.91 | 14 |
| 18 | Fear of illness | 20.13 | 9 | 21.05 | 10 | 20.60 | 8 |
| 19 | Social fear | 18.62 | 15 | 19.80 | 12 | 19.23 | 13 |
| 20 | Fear of natural disasters | 28.38 | 1 | 27.27 | 1 | 27.81 | 1 |

It was apparent from the above table that almost all the preschool children had fear for twenty fear factors but in varying degrees. However the table brings out noteworthy information that out of eighty preschool children almost every boy and girl had highest fear towards natural disaster, hence this fear was ranked first with highest mean score.

Consequently, categorisation of fear between two to five rankings was almost on the same platform for both boys and girls. With fear of doctor, sudden shocking incident, dentist and loneliness taking the second, third, fourth, fifth rank when put together. The above table also lucidly explains that both the boys and girls had same fear of monsters and ghosts and thus this fear was ranked sixth among them. The 7th fear among boys stands fourteenth among girls - the fear of death or injury. This finding could be owed to the reason that the boys by nature were too curious to know things around them but girls do not even like have the sight of a dead body. Bakushkina claim that no gender differences in overall fear scores neither between pre-school girls and boys nor for different fear types stands in contraction with the present finding ^[1].

The data also shows that fear of imaginary creatures ranked fourteen in boys and the same fear factor ranked seventh in girls because girls are more engaged in television than boys and imagine imaginary companion and thus they fear more.

The threshold score of the mean value for fear towards person ranked eighth and ninth among boys and girls respectively and the reason owes to this finding would be that girls socialize more than boys. Another important finding was that fear of illness ranked ninth for boys whereas it ranked tenth for girls.

A major finding was that the night time/bedtime fear ranked sixth in girls where as it ranked only tenth in boys. Once again the reason owed to this finding was that girls live in fantasy world than reality and most of the time they sleep with their parents and hence when left alone they fear more than boys.

By looking at the mean score on fear of places, the ranking was similar among boys and girls. Hence the finding of Zakharov in observing that some gender differences were found in origins of fear and anxiety of children which are more marked later, in adolescence and youth has to be noted ^[2].

The above table depicts that girls had least fear for going to school/school refusal and boys had more fear to this factor and the reason would be that girls are more comfortable to new environment and they like to go to school as they enjoy the company of new friends. Moreover boys had least fear of animals and reptiles and this fear had very less affect in boys than girls as it ranked thirteen in girls among the twenty fears that has been selected for the study.

Glancing at the overall twenty fear factors with seven of its related sub factors it appeared that both the boys and girls had highest fear of natural disaster and the least factor they feared was of animal and reptiles among boys and fear of going to school among girls.

3.3 Age specific differences among the identified fear factors

Fear in children tends to be age-specific and transient, with predominant fears at different ages. The object of fear may change from year to year, month to month, or even week to week. Many of these fears disappear as the child becomes older. The intensity of the fear were to be related to the learning and experiential history of the child. With increased maturity and experience a child should be able to figure out that previously feared stimuli were not threatening and the ability to cope with fear increases. As a result, something fearful for a newborn would not provoke the same response in a school-aged child ^[3]. The findings on the identified 20 fear factors and its age related differences were projected in Table – 2.

Table 2: Fear factors and its age-specific differences

| S. No | Fear factors | Age | | | ANOVA 'f' value |
|-------|--|---------|---------|---------|---------------------|
| | | 4 Years | 5 Years | 6 Years | |
| 1 | Fear of animals and reptiles | 15.36 | 18.04 | 6.08 | 2.984 ^{ns} |
| 2 | Fear towards the person | 18.84 | 22.84 | 20.70 | 3.117* |
| 3 | Fear of going to school/school refusal | 20.12 | 17.80 | 18.10 | 1.067 ^{ns} |
| 4 | Fear of sudden shocking incident | 21.52 | 23.80 | 25.07 | 2.462 ^{ns} |
| 5 | Fear of loneliness | 22.08 | 24 | 23.03 | 0.668 ^{ns} |
| 6 | Fear of places | 19.72 | 21.40 | 19.53 | 0.856 ^{ns} |
| 7 | Fear of criticism or teasing | 17.84 | 16.92 | 17.97 | 0.174 ^{ns} |
| 8 | Fear of new situation | 17.76 | 16.16 | 19.80 | 2.297 ^{ns} |
| 9 | Fear of night time/bedtime | 19.44 | 21.28 | 20.73 | 0.599 ^{ns} |
| 10 | Fear of imaginary creatures | 18.56 | 21.40 | 20.30 | 1.536 ^{ns} |
| 11 | Fear of monsters and ghosts | 19.36 | 23.56 | 22.50 | 3.662* |
| 12 | Fear of death and injury | 20.80 | 19.32 | 21.13 | 0.749 ^{ns} |
| 13 | Fear of transports | 16.92 | 17.60 | 18.63 | 0.529 ^{ns} |
| 14 | Fear of doctor | 22.72 | 26.04 | 24.17 | 1.147 ^{ns} |
| 15 | Fear of dentist | 21.84 | 23.92 | 23.90 | 0.606 ^{ns} |
| 16 | Fear of playing games/objects | 17.28 | 18.40 | 18.70 | 0.383 ^{ns} |
| 17 | Fear of toilet training | 18.32 | 18.92 | 19.40 | 0.272 ^{ns} |
| 18 | Fear of illness | 19.60 | 21.16 | 20.97 | 0.373 ^{ns} |
| 19 | Social fear | 18.60 | 19.20 | 19.77 | 0.181 ^{ns} |
| 20 | Fear of natural disaster | 25.12 | 30.04 | 28.20 | 3.629* |

A major finding that appeared from the study was that all the three age groups (4, 5 and 6 year old) had fear towards all the 20 fear factors but in varying degrees. Age was always considered to be one of the most important factor on which development of children's fear increases as the children grow older which was further proved by the present finding that the calculated 'f' value for the score procured by the children of various ages on the fear towards person was 3.117 and was statistically significant at five percent level. In other words, the fear towards the person has significant influence on children's age. Looking into the mean score of the four, five and six-year-old children, it was found that the four year old children had lower levels of fear compared to their counterparts. Hence present finding was found to be in accordance to the study of Spence who noted that the percentage of variance in anxiety symptoms explained in facing new people was lower in the younger compared to older preschool children^[4].

The significant 'f' value obtained towards the fear of monsters and ghost (3.662) further authenticates that age of preschool children influence their fear towards their factor. However, the mean score of five years was more than the other counterparts and the reason might be the children's references to such imaginary causes may increase with age. A child's relationship with the monsters begins at the age of two and half to three years when she/he learns to replace physical objects with mental images of objects, thus allowing her/he to imagine things such as frightening creatures and animate inanimate objects^[5].

The above table also lucidly explains the relationship between the age and the fear of natural disasters at an f value of 3.629 significant at five percent level. However, the mean score portrayed in the table shows an augmentation among five year old children and the reason would be that the children at this stage starts understanding the effect of natural disaster and by just watching televisions were afraid at the horrified view.

Consequently, other fear namely fears of sudden shocking incident, loneliness, place, criticism or teasing, new situation,

night time/bedtime, imaginary creatures, death and injury, transports, doctor, dentist, playing objects, toilet training, illness, and social fear had no influence on the age of preschooler.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

By and large certain fears were found to have gender-specific and age-specific differences and certain others do not with reference to preschool children of 4-6 years. Hence further study has to be undertaken to appraise the causes of these differences and moreover exploring the same fear factors with that of the other age groups namely late childhood and adolescence would add up to the available literature in finding out how the fear factors do change in its intensity with age and what could be done in alleviating the same.

5. References

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