

**PARENTS' IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN'S LIFE
CRISES: STRESS AS A FACTOR IN
READING DIFFICULTIES**

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In the fields of biology and medicine there is considerable disagreement over the definition of *stress* though the term is widely and persistently employed (Mason, 1975, p. 6). Use of the term stems from the 14th century, and its meanings are many:

Thus, stress seems to apply equally to a form of stimulus (or stressor), a force requiring change or adaptation (strain), a mental state (distress), and a form of bodily reaction or response (that is, Selye's

general adaptation syndrome of stress). (Rutter, 1983, p. 1).

Cannon (1915) first described the effects of stress on physical and psychological problems as the "fight or flight" phenomenon. He used the word *hemostasis* for the body's ability to adapt to stress. Later, Selye (1976) developed the concept of stress as the body's response to any extra demand made upon it. Selye has spoken of situations, events, or people who produce stress reactions as *stressors*.

Elkind (1981) expanded upon the work done by Cannon and Selye. According to him:

Stress, then, is any unusual demand for adaptation that forces a child to call upon energy reserves over and above that which s/he ordinarily expends and replenishes in the course of a 24-hour period. (p. 144).

While it is difficult to know what a particular youngster would "ordinarily expend and replenish" in a specified period of time, Cannon's "fight of flight" phenomenon, Selye's concept of "stressors," and Elkind's definition of stress are guiding principles and point the way to a deeper understanding of many students' personal and academic problems. Specifically, it may be that the task of learning to read becomes increasingly stressful for students who fail to cope with events in their personal lives that require them to make excessive social and emotional adjustments. The heightened stress and anxiety that develop as children perceive themselves at a loss to control critical life events may carry over to reading when it becomes yet another problem for them.

This study investigated the kind and number of life events youngsters, who were referred for reading difficulties to an interdisciplinary center, had experienced in the three years prior to their referral. Using an adaptation of Coddington's (1972) Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaire (SRRQ) and information obtained from parental interviews, 20 parents were asked to identify specific events in their children's lives that occurred during this three year period. They were also asked to discuss the effect they felt these had had on their youngster's behavior and to describe any relationship these events may have had to the child's reading difficulty. The SRRQ has been found effective in explaining the relationship between stress and maladaptive behavior in children (Gersten, et. al., 1977).

The Instrument: (Appendix A)

The SRRQ contains hierarchically arranged life events in rank order according to their potential for producing stress as determined by groups of teachers, pediatricians, and mental health professionals. Each event is assigned a specific point total on the basis of its significance. Typically, if a child's score falls below 150 points on the questionnaire he or she is about average with respect to stress load. If the child's score is between 150 and 300 points he or she has a better than average chance of showing some symptoms of stress. However, if the child's score is above 300 points there is a strong likelihood he or she will experience a serious change in health and/or behavior (Elkind, 1981, p. 162).

The questionnaire is divided into age groups, i.e., Preschool, Elementary School, Junior High School, and Senior High School. There are 36 life events appearing on the Elementary

School scale. At the top is "Death of a parent." This event merits a score of 91 life change units (LCU), while the last event is "Becoming a full-fledged member of a church," which merits a score of 25 LCU. Some of these events differ for each age group and others, while reappearing, are ranked differently because their effect on a child is perceived as being more or less significant at that point in the child's life. The SRRQ contains both socially desirable events as well as those that are negative or traumatic but which may cause stress in the youngster's life because they require the child to make additional social and emotional adjustments. But, for purposes of this study, only those events that parents perceived to have a negative influence on the child were used to compute the life change units score.

Subjects:

Twenty elementary school children from grades one through five were included in this study. These subjects ranged in age from 7.2 years to 11.5 years. All had been identified and referred for having reading difficulties by their teachers and parents. Standardized (Gates-MacGinitie, 1978) and informal reading tests (Burns & Roe, 1980) were used to determine each student's reading grade level. Three of the twenty students read at grade level. Four read one half year or less below their current grade placement. Two read one half to one full year below grade level and six read one to one and one half years below grade level. Although all these students were referred for reading difficulties four read almost one half year above grade level and one student read almost one full year above grade placement. The range of these students' Wechsler Intelligence Test scores (WISC-R) was 81 to 125. The students' mean WISC-R verbal score was 104, mean performance was 108, yielding a full scale mean score of 106.

Using Harris's (1975) Reading Expectancy formula, a Reading Expectancy Age score was also established for each student. One student read at expectancy level. Three read one half year or less below expectancy, four read one half to one year below expectancy, six read one to one and one half years below expectancy, one read between one and one half and two years below expectancy, and two read two or more years below their expectancy. Three of these students read above their expectancy levels.

Using only the negative events as a means of determining these students' life change units on the SRRQ the mean score was 297 for the group. However, one student's LCU score was 85. If this lowest score is eliminated and the mean computed on the remaining nineteen students it rises to 322.

Results:

As evidenced by the high LCU mean score on the SRRQ most of these children experienced an excessive number and variety of critical life events in the three year span preceding their referral to the center. Furthermore, parents frequently attributed some of these children's behavioral and reading difficulties to heightened stress resulting from these events. Since all these children were enrolled in grades one through five, virtually all of them had encountered these negative and traumatic events during their first three years in school when they were also trying to learn to read.

Interestingly enough, those events such as parental divorce

or separation, the incorporation of a child into a blended family situation, the child living in a single-parent home, a home in which the mother begins working, etc., were generally not seen by parents as having any serious effect on their children's behavior or reading. But, those events that signaled a loss of parental or social support and self esteem were those that parents tended to cite most frequently. And, they viewed these as being partially or mostly responsible for their children's behavioral and reading difficulties. For example eight of these twenty students had failed at least one grade in school. Nine had become increasingly argumentative with their parents (beyond what you might expect for children in this age range). Eight of these children's parents also described a negative change in the manner in which their peers accepted them. Seven of these children's families had recently moved to a new school district (most of these were from out-of-state), and nine of these children's fathers had changed occupations requiring increased absences from their homes.

It is important to note that the three children who read above their reading expectancy levels had an equal or greater LCU score on the SRRQ than all of the students reading below grade level. These children's parents also perceived that certain critical life events had had adverse effects on their children's behavior and reading, although contrary to their parents' perceptions these children appeared to have made a healthy adjustment to the increased stress in their lives and were coping successfully. However, these students' parents commonly described their children as being well liked and supported at home, in school, or among friends, and having a positive and consistent relationship with their father. Whereas, many of the other children's parents cited frequent social difficulties for them and noted that their fathers had taken jobs that required them to be away from home regularly.

While the SRRQ is supposed to be helpful in predicting a negative change in behavior or health as the result of an excessive number of critical life events, the results of this study seem to support its use in anticipating behavioral or reading difficulties for some children. But, because just three of these children had had serious illnesses or been hospitalized during the three-year period prior to their referral its use for making these kinds of forecasts may require further research. However, it is possible that among a larger group of children there would be a greater occurrence of health related problems and stress.

Data from this study are currently being used:

1. to determine the proportion of students referred to the center for reading difficulties who are functioning at or above the point on the SRRQ that predicts a possible serious change in health or behavior.

2. to identify those students whose reading difficulties may be related to increased stress as a result of various negative life events that require them to make excessive social and emotional adjustments. But, most importantly,

3. to identify appropriate methods for helping youngsters to read who have experienced an abundance of stress producing life events that leave them poorly equipped psychologically to cope with their problems in reading.

APPENDIX A SRRQ—Life Change Unit Values Elementary school age group

Rank	Life event	Life Change Units
1	Death of a parent	91
2	Divorce of parents	84
3	Marital separation of parents	78
4	Acquiring a visible deformity	69
5	Death of a brother or sister	68
6	Jail sentence of parent for 1 year or more	67
7	Marriage of parent to stepparent	65
8	Serious illness requiring hospitalization of child	62
9	Becoming involved with drugs or alcohol	61
10	Having a visible congenital deformity	60
11	Failure of a grade in school	57
12	Serious illness requiring hospitalization of parent	55
13	Death of a close friend	53
14	Discovery of being an adopted child	52
15	Increase in number of arguments between parents	51
16	Change in child's acceptance by peers (negative)	51
17	Birth of a brother or sister	50
18	Increase in number of arguments with parents	47
19	Move to a new school district	46
20	Beginning school	46
21	Suspension from school	46
22	Change in father's occupation requiring increased absence from home	45
23	Mother beginning to work	44
24	Jail sentence of parent for 30 days or less	44
25	Serious illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	41
26	Addition of third adult to family (i.e., grandmother, etc.)	41
*27	Outstanding personal achievement	39
28	Loss of job by a parent	38
29	Death of a grandparent	38
30	Brother or sister leaving home	36
31	Pregnancy in unwed teenage sister	36
32	Change in parents' financial status	29
33	Beginning another school year	27
*34	Decrease in number of arguments with parents	27
*35	Decrease in number of arguments between parents	25
*36	Becoming a full fledged member of a church	25

*omitted for purposes of this study.

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