Children's Fears: Reflections on Research

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Over the past decade a plethora of studies were conducted in which children's fear of failure on competitive school tasks was studied in relation to their level of motivation (Atkinson, 1957; Atkinson and Feather, 1966; Atkinson and Litwin, 1960) and educational achievement (Gaudry and Spielberger, 1971; Hill and Sarason, 1966; Sarason and others, 1960; Spielberger, 1966, 1972). Obviously, there was utility in gaining an understanding of children's fear of failure on academic tasks in relation to their performance in school, but those investigations provided no information regarding children's fears outside the data generating systems operated by the researchers themselves (Barker, 1968). In fact, in the past four decades only a few studies were reported in which children were asked about or allowed to express their fears without extensive manipulation and control.

In one of the studies which did allow for expression of fears, Angelino, Dollins, and Mech (1956) asked groups of children to list the "worries" and fears which they thought children of their own age group have. They found that fears pertaining to school (worries about grades, fear of teachers, stage fright) increased between ages nine and twelve but decreased thereafter. Previously, Jersild, Goldman, and Loftus (1940) observed what seemed excessive concern about "failing a test" in fifth and sixth grade children when 80 percent of them reported that fear, while Zeligs (1939) noted that health of family members was of concern to a greater proportion of twelve-year-olds than were worries about school marks and reports.

Pinter and Lev (1940) also reported that fifth and sixth grade children were more concerned about the welfare of their families than about happenings at school, and Croake (1967) observed recently that a greater percentage of adolescent youth were fearful about political happenings, such as war, than were concerned about events at school.

At an earlier time, Jersild, Markey, and Jersild (1933) conducted individual interviews in which children ranging in age from five to twelve were asked to tell about their fears. Jersild and associates developed a
classification scheme based on interview content and reported that 20 percent of all children interviewed made specific reference to fear of ghosts, skeletons, corpses, death, and of mysterious and supernatural events (the largest single class of fears). In addition, while 15 percent of the eleven and twelve year olds referred to fear of bodily injury and physical danger, only five percent of the five and six year olds revealed fears of that type.

Later, Jersild and Holmes (1935) interviewed the parents of three-, four-, five-, and six-year-old children to ascertain further description of developmental factors in children's fears. Jersild and his colleague concluded that during preschool there was a decline in the frequency of fears in response to concrete or tangible stimuli such as loud noises, strange objects, and the like, but an increase in fears of imagined, anticipated, and supernatural dangers. Jersild and Holmes also asked the parents of 34 children specific questions concerning their child's reaction to the idea of death and dying. Eight children expressed a definite fear of death. Seventeen were said to have either asked questions or talked about the subject, while only nine of the children had not touched upon the topic of death in their conversations with parents.

Clearly, the social matrix in which fears develop has changed along many dimensions since the early studies conducted by Jersild and his associates, but few subsequent investigations were designed to describe fears from children's perspective. In a recently completed study (Bauer, 1973), children in the kindergarten, second and sixth grades were asked about their fears in individual interviews. The content of fears uncovered in those interviews confirmed earlier findings regarding developmental changes in fears along a reality dimension. More specifically, preschool and early elementary school children expressed fears with more imaginary content as evidenced by 74 percent of the kindergartners, 53 percent of second graders, and 5 percent of sixth graders reporting fear of ghosts and monsters. On the other hand, 55 percent of sixth grade, 33 percent of second grade, and 11 percent of kindergarten children referred to fear of bodily injury and physical danger. Earlier, Maurer (1965) interviewed children ranging in age from five to fourteen years and found that fears became more realistic with advancing age. Thirty-three percent of the five and six year olds interviewed identified fear of ghosts and monsters while none of the eleven and twelve year olds did. Forty-two percent of that age group, however, referred to fear of machinery such as weapons, cars, electricity, and other man-made gadgets.

Apparently, the development of fears is a correlate of more general cognitive development and of growing awareness of the meaning of death in a technologically sophisticated world. As a result, fears reported at varying ages seem to parallel developmental changes observed in children's attitude to death. For example, a number of investigators (see Grollman, 1967; and Mitchell, 1967 for reviews) found that when asked to explain its meaning to them children between five and seven years of age anthropomorphized death as a monster, while other inquiries (Anthony, 1940; Nagy, 1948) revealed that children seven to ten years of age associated death with separation and bodily mutilation. It is interesting to note in that regard that 40 percent of second and 25 percent of sixth graders in the Bauer study reported fear of the dark, being alone, strange sights, bloody people, and deformities. On the other hand, children's focus on bodily injury and physical danger at the sixth grade seems to be analogous with the findings of an investigation conducted by Childers and Wimmer (1971) who reported that children at about age ten recognize the universality of and possibility for their own death.

Portrayal by Mass Media

A significant question may be raised at this juncture regarding the effect of the portrayal of life by the mass media on the development of children's fears as well as their conceptions of death. Bauer (1973), for instance, found that without prompting, 31 percent of the kindergartners, 33 percent
of the second graders, and 15 percent of the sixth graders made direct reference to happenings on television or in motion pictures as frightening to them. In addition, Sproull (1973) observed that prekindergartners not only modeled their verbal and nonverbal behavior after those observed on Sesame Street, but that segments of the program containing a monster unexpectedly generated fear references in some children. Actually, the content of children's television programming may be reflected in the relatively high proportion of children of kindergarten and first grade age reporting fear of ghosts and monsters. Indeed, with the trend toward stories with macabre themes designed to frighten, graphic news releases describing death and destruction in detail, and violence in children's programming itself, children are provided with numerous opportunities for acquiring fears. (For reviews of research concerning the mass media see: Comstock, Rubinstein, and Murray, 1972; and Weiss, 1969.)

Even though a number of investigations were conducted in which the impact of televised violence on aggressive behavior was studied, few studies were reported analyzing the association between exposure to the mass media and children's emotional reactions, while none focused on media content in relation to children's fears or attitudes to death. (For reviews see: Murray, Nayman, and Atkin, 1972; Stein, 1972.) Nevertheless, when the facts that 99 percent of households having children have television sets, that children begin viewing as young as 18 months to two years of age, that they spend at least three to four hours each day in front of their sets, and that young children spend more time than older ones watching television (Murray, 1973) are considered within the context of the difficulty preschool and kindergarten children have differentiating fantasy from reality (Piaget, 1962), the need for such investigations becomes apparent. Indeed, it seems that young children whose fears tend to be imaginary are watching television for greater portions of the day than older ones. Moreover, the problem may be aggravated by the decrease in opportunities for two-way communication among residents of urban society generally and between family members specifically brought on by technology (Mott, 1973).

Despite the fact that individual attitudes reflect the culture, little is known about the effect of variation in social and ethnic background on development of children's fears or their attitudes to death. A survey conducted by Mott (1968) revealed that children in a lower socioeconomic urban community were exposed to television and radio programs which portray death as violent, impersonal, and sudden for 16 to 18 hours each day. Unfortunately, no comparative analysis of children's fears or attitudes toward death was ever carried out. Obviously, professionals in education ought to have information regarding the kinds of fears as well as conceptions of life and death constructed by children under these circumstances if they are expected to contribute positively to the latter's emotional and social development.

In addition, if teachers are to be assisted in helping children deal with their fears and develop healthy attitudes toward death, then more extensive naturalistic observation of the dynamics of the classroom group in varying behavioral settings (Barker, 1968) involving death is clearly necessary. Little information is available concerning the base rate (frequency of occurrence) of crisis situations or the interpersonal dynamics that transpire when classroom groups are confronted with episodes such as sudden or prolonged death of a classmate, parent, or teacher.

In conclusion, the bulk of past research concerning children's fears had an inordinately narrow focus. Ultimately, the fears children have about their performance in competitive academic settings are secondary to their real concerns which are diverse and confront professionals with fundamental questions about the meaning of life and death in an urban technological society. Perhaps, reluctance to ask children about their fears betrays increasing uncertainty, anxiety, and perplexity in the adult world.
References


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