

# I. STUDIA I ROZPRAWY

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## STRESS COPING STRATEGIES FOR 8- AND 9-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

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Stress is an integral part of our lives. It also applies to our childhood. That is why it is so important to know how children cope with stress (how they learn coping strategies) and to equip them with the skill set to cope constructively with stressful situations throughout life. This article describes strategies for coping with stress that are characteristic for children at the end of early school education. They have been identified in the course of my own research aimed at characterizing child stress and relate to a fragment of research activities aimed at 8- and 9-year-old children. The research established that in some children the developmental process of coping with stress has started: children look for, investigate, and think how to cope with difficulties. In this struggle, however, they focus on people who could be a source of support for them in coping with stressful situations. Among children's stress coping strategies, an important role is also played by emotionally focused strategies, which are aimed at reducing negative emotions and arousing positive emotions.

**Key words:** stress, resistance to stress, children's physiological and behavioral reactions to stress, problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies, coping strategies for children in early school age

### Introduction

In recent years the number of factors causing stress in children has increased as a result of the modern lifestyle implied by social and economic transformations requiring constant adaptation to changing conditions, and the increase in negative phenomena such as greater social poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, increasing number of divorces, family conflicts, long absence of one parent due to their work abroad, loneliness, aggression and

preoccupation with success. Georgia Witkin has shown on the basis of her own research that childhood is a period full of strong tensions. The author conducted "Childhood stress test" and identified groups of factors causing stress in children's life.<sup>1</sup> These include, among others:

- factors coming from the school environment, which are connected with grades, homework, tests and promotion to the next class;
- factors coming from the family environment that reflect children's concern for their family, their parents' health;
- factors related to peer environment such as the lack of acceptance, mockery, ridicule, backbiting, slander, teasing, and disloyal and false friends;
- factors related to the news coming from the surrounding world concerning bombings, nuclear disasters, environmental pollution or wars.

Moreover, Georgia Witkin's research indicates that adults have insufficient knowledge about child stress and are not always aware of it. The author showed that:

- Parents do not know how often their children worry.
- Parents are not aware of how many children feel lonely.
- Parents have no idea how often insomnia of their children is caused by stress.
- Parents have no idea how often their children are afraid to talk to them.
- Parents underestimate the stress generated by school and overestimate the importance of peer pressure.
- Parents do not realize how often children's fears are realistic.<sup>2</sup>

Children have their own specific stress language, which we should be able to read correctly. They speak to us through their behaviour, their emotions and body language. The physical reactions of children to stress, identified by Georgia Witkin's research, are: insomnia, stomach pains, nausea, and headaches.<sup>3</sup> The above empirical data are confirmed by my own research<sup>4</sup> on the topic in question. In the course of my research I have shown that children in stressful situations feel headaches, have problems with sleeping, stomach aches, and nausea. However, among the behavioural symptoms of child stress, I found the following reactions in children: gloomy mood, avoiding

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<sup>1</sup> G. Witkin, *Stres dziecięcy*, Poznań 2000, p. 25-26 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28-30 ff.

<sup>4</sup> The empirical research presented in this text is part of a study on stressful situations of children leaving early school education – children attending the third grade of primary school (8- and 9-year-old). The research aimed at characterizing various aspects of child stress was based on the accounts of 280 children and the opinions of their mothers (280) and 100 teachers of early school education. The research was conducted on the basis of questionnaires and individual interviews.

companionship – desire for loneliness, running away into dreams, getting into conflicts with siblings, getting into conflicts with peers.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the ability of parents, teachers, and educators to recognize children's stressful situations and to notice the above mentioned physiological and behavioural reactions, combining these reactions with their difficult situations in them becomes extremely important. It is therefore invaluable to help children to develop their stress coping skills, to be aware of their strategies for coping with stress and, if necessary, to be constructive in directing their actions in this area. It is important that the stress protection system they have developed during childhood can be applied effectively throughout their lives.

### Stress and resistance to stress

The term “stress”, as it is currently used, was coined by Hans Selye, a Canadian researcher and physiologist, who defined biological stress as “the non-specific response of the body to any *demand* for change”.<sup>6</sup> Unspecific changes in the functioning of the human body (nausea, headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, and loss of appetite) arise when the human body is subject to the influence of a stressor (stress-inducing factor). Because they occur in connection with changes in psychological regulatory mechanisms such as cognitive processes, emotions or motivation, psychological stress, which is sometimes treated differently, is also distinguished.

Psychological stress is identified:

- with the internal state of the body meaning negative emotional tension (e.g. I.L. Janis' theory of emotional tension). According to Irving L. Janis, a stress situation in an average person causes a high degree of emotional tension, which interferes with the normal way of reaction;
- with external factors disturbing proper functioning, i.e. referring to the characteristics of the environment in which stimuli considered harmful or threatening appear (e.g. Tadeusz Tomaszewski's theory of difficult situations or Maria Tyszkowa's developmental theory of difficult situations);
- with a type of relationship between an individual and his or her environment (e.g. transactional stress theory by Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman). According to this approach, stress is a result of human cognitive processes, i.e. it depends on how a person assesses and understands his/her relationship with the environment. It is therefore “a special kind of relation-

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<sup>5</sup> M. Cywińska, *Stres dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym. Objawy, przyczyny, możliwości przeciwdziałania*, Poznań 2017, p. 208-225.

<sup>6</sup> H. Selye, *Stres okiełznany*, Warszawa 1977, p. 25.

ship between man and his environment, which is assessed by man as being taxing or exceeding his resources and endangering his well-being".<sup>7</sup>

Stress is part of our lives. Hans Selye shows that we should not always avoid it. Apart from destructive stress, which disorganizes our lives and destroys people and is a reaction to threats and fears, we can also cope with eustress, i.e. good stress, which contains pleasant experiences of joy, fulfilment and self-expression, caused by stressors motivating people to make efforts and shape our life achievements.

It is also worth emphasizing that every person has a different "resistance to stress". It is treated either as a lack of emotional response to a difficult situation (e.g. lack of such emotional states as anxiety, fear, anger, etc.) or as the ability to maintain the previous direction, efficiency and level of organisation of behaviour despite the occurrence of stress. The ability to think and act rationally despite the stressor serves here as an indicator of resistance understood in this way.

Resistance to stress is determined by various biological and psychological factors. These include:

- the tasks that a person performs (when performing known, trained tasks, people show more resistance than with other, less known tasks);
- physiological processes and psychological changes that occur independently of the stress situation (e.g. illness, fatigue lowers stress tolerance);
- constant characteristics of the individual determining his or her style of reaction (features of the nervous system, childhood experiences, self-esteem, features of emotional reaction, way of perceiving reality).<sup>8</sup>

The above factors suggest that resistance to stress can be modified and practiced - it can be strengthened during an individual's life, which is confirmed by research conducted by, among others: Seymour Epstein, Neal E. Miller, Janusz Reykowski, and Irena Heszen.

## **Coping in stressful situations**

In the face of stressful situations it becomes extremely important to cope with them. Coping with stress is conditioned by a cognitive assessment of the situation in which we find ourselves. The initial cognitive evaluation determines whether a stimulus reaching the brain is identified as a source of stress. If this stressor (situation) is assessed as a threat, a challenge, a loss/harm, then the basic adaptive process of coping is initiated. Coping is defined by

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<sup>7</sup> J.F. Terelak, *Psychologia stresu*, Bydgoszcz 2001, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> A. Frączek, M. Kofta, *Frustracja i stres psychologiczny*, [In:] *Psychologia*, Ed. T. Tomaszewski, Warszawa 1978, p. 670-678.

Susan Folkman and Richard S. Lazarus as “cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that tax or exceed the resources of the person”.<sup>9</sup> The very process of coping with a difficult situation depends on a secondary cognitive assessment of the situation in which the person assesses what he or she can do to meet its requirements. This cognitive activity therefore relates to the ability and resources to cope with a stressor.

Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman have identified two categories of coping strategies: problem focused strategies and emotionally focused strategies.

Problem-focused coping is aimed at controlling the stressor (situation) in such a way as to achieve the previous goal, which requires searching for, collecting, processing and using information about the stress event, thus realistically and accurately assessing the stressor and available resources. A person’s cognitive activity is therefore directed to “search” the behavioural repertoire (strategies) for those that would provide an opportunity to reduce or remove the stressful properties of the situation, i.e. solve the problem.

Emotionally focused coping in turn aims to reduce unpleasant emotional tension. To this end, intrapsychic processes are included, covering all cognitive processes that regulate emotions. This function is performed by defensive mechanisms, the set of which forms the defence system of the “I”. These mechanisms are unconscious processes. Their task is to defend against fear, as well as to protect the sense of dignity of the individual, his or her high self-esteem, good self-esteem.<sup>10</sup> It is worth emphasizing that defence mechanisms are the result of the process of socialization, so they are not innate properties of the subject. Functioning in different social groups, appearing in specific cultural and institutional arrangements shapes different ways of defending against fear by distorting reality or denying it. In general, however, their action – as unrealistic forms of protection against difficult situations – is adaptive. They alleviate symptoms of stress, but do not eliminate its causes.

Coping in the context of my own research<sup>11</sup> on children at the end of early school education, i.e. 8 and 9 years old will be considered in this article on the basis of the two categories of coping strategies indicated above.

In formulating the research questions on the above topic, I was therefore guided by the coping functions (categories) selected by Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman: the instrumental (task-based) function, focused on the problem and the function relating to the self-regulation of emotions.

Therefore, I asked children the following questions:

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<sup>9</sup> Ch. L. Sheridan, S.A. Radmacher, *Radzenie sobie w sytuacjach trudnych*, Nowiny Psychologiczne, 1997, 4, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> H. Grzegółowska-Klarkowska, *Mechanizmy obronne osobowości*, Warszawa 1986, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> M. Cywińska, *Stres dzieci*, p. 225-231 ff.

- Think and tell me what can be done to cope with a problem that causes fear/anxiety, anger/fury, sadness?

- Think and tell me what can be done to cope with fear/anxiety, anger/fury, sadness?

It must be noted that a considerable proportion of the children surveyed did not provide answers to questions about problem focused and emotionally focused coping strategies. Empirical research has shown that some children were not able to indicate any ways of coping in difficult situations, in stressful situations or their answers were inadequate in relation to the questions posed.

The analysis of children's statements on the above questions shows that children prefer the following strategies for coping with problems and emotions. These are in order of preference:

- seeking guidance and support (coping with the problem - 76 answers; coping with emotions - 57 answers),

- trying to forget about the problem (coping with the problem - 51 answers, coping with emotions - 53 answers),

- undertaking alternative forms of activity (coping with the problem - 50 answers, coping with emotions - 51 answers),

- expressive discharge of emotions (coping with the problem - 32 answers, coping with emotions - 35 answers).

It follows from the empirical data presented that in order to cope with stressful situations, children first sought help from people they were in contact with, most often parents and friends. Some children's statements within this strategy are as follows: *"you can talk to a colleague"*, *"you can talk to someone"*, *"I call my mom or dad to help me with a problem"*, *"I hug my parents"*, *"you can talk to your parents"*, *"I hug my mom"*, *"I ask my mom how to solve this"*, *"you can talk to your mom or dad, sister or brother"*, *"you can meet a friend"*, *"you can talk to friends"*, *"I'd talk to my grandmother"*, *"you can make a plea to a loved one"*, *"you can hug and ask your parents for help"*, *"you can call your mom and she'll tell you what you can do"*, *"you can confide in someone close to you"*, *"I call a friend"*.

Another strategy pointed out by the children was a strategy focusing on trying to forget about the problem, which is illustrated by the following statements made by the children: *"you can fall asleep"*, *"I run into dreams, fantasy"*, *"you can think about something nice and calm down"*, *"I think about cool things"*, *"you can dream"*, *"you can not think about it, forget about the problem"*, *"you can go to sleep"*, *"you can forget about the wrong thing"*, *"you can think about something else"*, *"you can remember something nice"*, *"I think about good things"*, *"I think about something funny"*.

The third in the order of the children's answers was the strategy concerning their alternative forms of activity, which is illustrated by the following statements: *"I play and go outside"*, *"I draw, play board games"*, *"I go out to the*

swimming pool, do sports", "I eat ice cream, read a book", "you can play with your pet", "I try to do something", "you can play with your friends", "you can read or play an instrument", "you can play with your mother or brother", "you can watch TV", "you can stroke animals", "I watch fairy tales".

The strategy of expressive discharge of emotions, in turn, is characterized by such exemplary statements as: "you can hit the pillow", "you can crumple the card", "I hit the pillow", "you can stomp on the floor", "you can scream, cry", "you can bite the pillow", "I break the crayon", "I hit the ball", "you can shout out loud", "you can tear the card", "you can crumple the newspaper".

It seems that the dominant strategy of "seeking leadership and support" which emerged in the course of the study fits into the confrontational style of coping with stress oriented towards the person/emotion<sup>12</sup>. It shows a focus on those who could be the source of sustaining emotions; those who provide support, advice, and information about the stress situation.

An important role in children's coping with stress is also played, as shown by my own research, by a style of avoiding the problem by means of suppression (a strategy that reflects attempts to forget about the problem: "I dream, fantasize", "I think about something nice, pleasant") and avoidance through distraction, reflecting the activity of doing another activity (strategy of taking alternative forms of activity: "I play with my colleagues", "I draw", "I play the instrument"). It should be added that one of the forms of avoidance through distraction is to engage in social contacts,<sup>13</sup> which takes into account the social aspect of coping.<sup>14</sup>

Children's coping strategies in stressful situations – as shown by the study – also reflect the palliative approach (strategies) mentioned in the literature, aimed at reducing negative emotions, and the salutary approach (strategies), aimed at arousing positive emotions (e.g. dreaming of nice situations, things, listening to music), corresponding to an emotionally focused coping function.<sup>15</sup>

Research on this aspect of child stress shows that children very rarely at this stage of development try to cope with difficult and/or stressful situations on their own; very rarely do they try to consider different ways of solving the problem on their own and seek help and support from people close to them. They expect to have a conversation, to find ways of solving the problem, and to seek a solution with a parent or friend.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. I. Heszen, *Psychologia stresu. Korzystne i niekorzystne skutki stresu zyciowego*, Warszawa 2013, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. N.S. Endler, J.D. Parker, *Assessment of multidimensional coping. Task, emotion and avoidance strategies*, *Psychological Assessment*, 1994, 6, p. 50-60.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. Folkman, J.T. Moskowitz, *Coping: Pitfalls and promise*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2004, 55, p. 745-774.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. E. Gruszczyńska, *State affect and emotion – focused coping: Examining for correlated change and causality*, *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 2013, 26, p. 103-119.



## Conclusion

The analysis of stress coping strategies for children at the end of early school education carried out on the basis of the fragment of my own research presented here leads to the global conclusion that in some children the development process has started in the indicated area: children talk, ask questions, look for, explore, wonder how to face difficulties. The role of adults (parents, teachers) is to give them far-reaching support in this area.

It is invaluable to discuss, to provoke an exchange of thoughts, to exchange views on the possibilities of solving stressful situations, difficult situations for all children. It is important to activate those who are already progressing in this area, and to stimulate those who are less reflective in this aspect.

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