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ABSTRACT

Three studies were conducted in an initial attempt to investigate the psychological importance of trivial everyday frustrations encountered by preschool children. Study 1 analyzed the frequency and quality of experiences that could be interpreted as interfering in some way with children's natural pursuit of their desires. In a nursery school setting, 97 3- and 4-year-olds were observed over several days for a total of 30 minutes. Anecdotal records were kept by observers, which were later classified into eight categories of frustrating experiences. Analysis of results indicated that such experiences were surprisingly frequent (approximately one per five minutes). Study 2 investigated whether the results were peculiar to the school environment. Thirty-minute consecutive observations of four-year-olds were conducted on public playgrounds and beaches. The data was unexpectedly consistent with the first study. The third study was designed to analyze the wide range of experiences for different children. The original procedure was repeated with the original subjects during the next school year. The relative frequency of constraining events was stable, indicating that certain children are more prone than others to such occurrences. Discussion focuses on theoretical and practical issues raised by the research, including adequacy of methodology, significance of the events in determining behavior patterns, and whether it is wise for adults to intervene to reduce frequency of frustrating interactions. (DP)

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Life's Little Problems: An Intensive Look at the Daily Experiences of Young Children

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Informal Paper

The research or work reported herein was performed pursuant to a contract with the Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through the Chicago Early Education Research Center, a component of the National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education, contract OEC-3-7-070706-3118.

LIFE'S LITTLE PROBLEMS: AN INTENSIVE LOOK AT THE DAILY EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG CHILDREN[1]

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Life, as we all know, has its ups and downs, no matter what our age or station. We know equally well that these shifts of fortune vary greatly in magnitude and frequency, from the rare but memorable successes and failures, signalling the beginning or end of definable periods of life, to the more numerous smaller delights and annoyances that pass almost unnoticed in the course of each day. The psychological importance of the more dramatic of these events is hardly open to question, hence their prominence in histories, biographies, and case studies. The significance of the more abundant yet seemingly trivial happenings that make up the bulk of human experience is far less clear and, therefore, greatly in need of systematic study.

The set of three studies described in this report is concerned with the more commonplace of these ups and downs and, even more narrowly, with the "downs" as against the "ups." The objects of study, as the title implies, were young children of nursery school age. The choice of subjects within this age group and the decision to concentrate exclusively on the more bothersome aspects of experience were based on the authors' hunch that the frequency of these "negative"

encounters during the early years of schooling was greater than we and others might expect and might well comprise an ubiquitous, though commonly overlooked, feature of the young child's world. Furthermore, we hoped that from an examination of these events something might be learned about the beginning stages of adaptation to the school environment.

STUDY I

The first study has already been fully reported in a previous issue of this journal[2] and need only be described here in brief, chiefly to reveal its major findings together with the observational techniques and coding categories that were used with only slight modification in the two subsequent investigations. The study began as an attempt to determine the frequency with which children in nursery school undergo experiences that might be interpreted as interfering in some way with the natural pursuit of their desires. In addition to their quantity, the quality of these experiences was also thought to be important and a classification scheme was sought that would cover for the nursery school environment all of the common "varieties of constraint."

Subjects and procedures. Ninety-seven three- and four-year-old children who were enrolled in the University of Chicago Nursery School served as the subjects of the study. This group, which contained

almost equal numbers of girls and boys, included all of the children attending the School during the spring term of 1967, when the study was conducted.

In brief, the observational technique entailed watching each child for three periods, each of two-minute duration, every day for one week. During each two-minute observation the observer made an anecdotal record of all episodes in which the child experienced any interference with the natural pursuit of his desire. Descriptions of these episodes which were transcribed and later typed on cards, were classified by three judges into eight categories. These were:

1. "Desire vs. desire" -- e.g. The observed child is playing with a toy when another child comes and tries to take it away.

2. "Desire vs. teacher expectation" -- e.g. The observed child is interrupted in the midst of an activity by a teacher's request or command to do something that she (the teacher) wants done.

3. "Desire vs. inability" -- e.g. The observed child is thwarted in his attempt to do something by his lack of strength, height, coordination, or the like.

4. "Desire vs. teacher overlook" -- e.g. The observed child seeks the teacher's help or attention and is denied it.

5. "Desire vs. clutter, crowds" -- e.g. The observed child is jostled or otherwise prevented from doing something by the unintentional actions of other children or adults.

6. "Desire vs. environmental limitation" -- e.g. The observed child's request or search for an object is unfulfilled because the object is unavailable.

7. "Desire vs. institutional restriction" -- e.g. The observed child's activity is interrupted because of a school regulation, such as dismissal time.

8. "Ambiguous" -- This category contained those episodes that did not fit clearly under any of the other seven categories.

Results. The distribution of observations among these eight categories is shown in Table 1. When it is recalled that nearly 100 children were observed, each for one half-hour, the total frequency of 587 constraining experiences can be seen to be equivalent to about six per child or, if this frequency is used as an estimate of what happens at other times, about one such episode every five minutes throughout his school day. The child at the median of the distribution was observed to have encountered five constraining episodes during the 30 minutes of observation. A few children experienced as many as 15 constraints during this time period; others experienced only one or two.

Insert Table 1 about here

A more detailed analysis revealed that the occurrence of these events was no more frequent for boys than for girls, nor did it seem to matter what time of day or which day of the week the observations were collected. Somewhat more surprivingly, four-year-olds, who were in their second year of school attendance seemed to have just as difficult a time, at least in these terms, as did their three-year-old classmates, who were in the midst of their first year of school.

As can be seen in Table 1, more than half of the episodes involved the children's encounters with each other and with their teachers. (The teacher/pupil ratio in this school was approximately one to six.) Apparently the nursery school world in one in which people interfere with people much of the time.

Considering the total set of data from this study, the emergent impression is of an environment in which minor mishaps of one sort or another are the rule rather than the exception. A child's passage through nursery school seems to be rather "bumpy," to say the least. It would be unwise, however, to be prematurely evaluative about these "bumps" by suggesting that a child's life in school is made miserable by them. Indeed, visible signs of discomfort, such as crying or fighting, were surprisingly rare in the observers' records. In fact, several instances were reported in which the observed child emerged triumphant from his encounter with frustration. All we know for certain is that these

experiences occurred frequently, much more frequently than we had expected they would, in a relatively spacious, well-equipped, and well-staffed nursery school. They comprised, in short, a fact of life with which all who entered that school had to deal.

STUDY II

One of the more obvious questions raised by the results of the first study was whether the seemingly high frequency of constraining experiences was peculiar to the school environment or whether these experiences might occur with equal frequency outside of school. We had begun the series of studies with an interest in the child's adjustment to life in a classroom and had suspected that the physical and social restrictions arising from many people living together and sharing the same materials, together with the impersonal authority of the teacher, would create a set of demands that would be markedly more severe than in other, less institutionalized, environments. We hypothesized, therefore, that constraining experiences of the sort observed in the first study would be significantly less frequent in observations of young children outside of school.

Subjects and procedures. In order to produce a set of data that reasonably might be compared with the results of the first study, we decided to observe children in those out-of-school settings in which the

environmental press was roughly the same as in the free play situations that predominated in the University nursery school. Thus, we sought situations where several children were present yet where there was considerable freedom to pursue individual interests and desires. We also wanted settings where the presence of an adult observer would not seem too unnatural. Accordingly, we settled on observing children in an outdoor public playground and, because the observations were made during the summer months, a public beach, both located in the same community as the University nursery school.

Because it seemed unlikely that the same children would be available for observation on several different occasions in these public places, the original procedure of making three two-minute observations on five consecutive days was abandoned. Instead, each child was observed for 30 consecutive minutes by one of two trained observers. Upon finding a child who looked to be about four years old the observer would locate the adult or older person who had accompanied the potential subject to the playground or beach. If the observer's estimate of the child's age was confirmed (only children between the ages of 4-0 and 4-11 were accepted as subjects), she then asked permission to observe the child at play. A running account of the child's activity was kept in note form and an elaborated version, based on the notes, was dictated into a tape recorder when the observer returned to her office.

Typically, the protocol for each subject was dictated before the next observation was begun. Typed transcripts of the taped observations were read by each observer, who then identified those episodes involving some interference with the natural pursuit of each child's desire. Following this, each episode was labeled by the observer as belonging to one of the eight categories described in the first study.[3] These classifications were later checked by two additional judges who changed the coding in a very small number of cases in which they disagreed with the observer's judgment while agreeing with each other. In all, 42 children, equally divided by sex, were observed.

Results. To our surprise, the children observed in these out-of-school environments seemed to undergo as many interruptions of activity as did the children we had observed in the nursery school. The average number of constraints for the 42 children was 5.2; the median was 4.5. Once again the range of these events was considerable, extending from a few children who were seen to experience only one or two such encounters in a half-hour to a few who experienced twelve or more. As before, no differences were found between the observations of boys and girls.

The distribution of the events among the coding categories is shown in Table 2. The two most frequently occurring classes of events --

"desire vs. desire" and "desire vs. adult expectation" can be seen to account for more than 75 per cent of the episodes. As before, the chief source of disruption seems to be other children, though the actual percentage in that category is noticeably smaller in school than out. The higher percentage in the out-of-school environment might possibly be accounted for by the presence of many older children, a condition that was not present in the nursery school. It might also have something to do with the quality of adult supervision on playgrounds and beaches.

Insert Table 2 about here

However the differences in specific categories might be explained, they should not distract the reader's attention from the overall similarity in the frequency of these events in and out of school. Apparently life is as "bumpy" for the young child on the beach or the playground as it is for him in the classroom. Obviously we are still at a loss to determine what effect, if any, this "bumpiness" might have on a child's development, but the pervasiveness of this feature of life is more clearly established by this second study. There remains the possibility, of course, that in other contexts, such as the home, the child's experience is relatively free of these types of constraint. But even if this were so (and evidence on this point is badly

needed) it would not appreciably reduce the significance of these two sets of findings. Even though he may have periods of greater tranquillity in more sheltered and less crowded environments, the young child must still come to grips with a world that does not always go the way he wants it to. This study and the one that preceded it call our attention to how often he is called upon to face this reality.

STUDY III

In both of the first two studies the range of encounters with these minor mishaps extended from a few children who may have one or two such experiences every half-hour to a few who seem to come up against this type of situation every two minutes or so. To understand the meaning of this range of events we must ask whether it is caused solely by chance variations within the environment -- such that one child encounters more than his share of these experiences on one day, another on the next -- or whether certain children are more or less prone to get themselves into these situations than are others. If these events behave as chance happenings, irrespective of who is involved in them, they would tend to be more evenly distributed in the population, over time, than would be true if their occurrence were linked to personal traits or habits of individuals. One of the most direct ways of answering this question is to see whether the children who encounter many or few of these experiences during one

period of time attain a similar record at some later date. This, then, became the goal of the third study.

Subjects and procedures. Observations were conducted at the University of Chicago Nursery School during the fall of 1967, employing exactly the same procedure as described in Study I and using as subjects those children who had been observed the preceding spring. This group of 30 children, 17 boys and 13 girls, comprised all of the returnees to the Nursery School who had taken part in the earlier study. All were between four and five years old at the time this third study was undertaken. As in the first study, thirty minutes of observation -- three two-minute periods each weekday morning for one week -- were obtained for each child.

Results. A comparison of the frequency of constraining events obtained from observing the same children during two school terms, spring and fall, yielded a correlation coefficient of .40, which is statistically significant beyond the .01 level. Thus, children who had a high or low number of these encounters in the spring tended to have a similar relative frequency of such experiences when observed about six months later. This finding would seem to imply that there is something about the children themselves that determines how many "bumps" they encounter in school (and probably outside of school as well). It does not give any hint of what this "something" is, whether it is as

complicated as a predisposition for self-inflicted discomfort (as has been posited to account for the phenomenon of "accident proneness") or as simple as a preference for activities such as block-building or colouring, in which the likelihood of these constraining events might be consistently high or low. Obviously, more needs to be known about the apparent stability of this aspect of the young child's experience. At present the important point to keep in mind is that if the inequalities among children remain fairly consistent over time, the cumulative effect would be to increase the absolute difference between extremes. Since these events seem to occur with relatively high frequency in the nursery school in which the observations were made, the children who were the most "bump-prone," so to speak, might undergo, in a year's time, several thousand more of these experiences than might their least "bump-prone" classmates. It is well to remember, of course, that even the latter group will not finish the year unscathed. A child who experiences only two of these events every half-hour (a very low frequency) will have undergone about two thousand of them by the time he completes his first year of nursery school. During the same period, a child at the other end of the continuum might experience fifteen or sixteen thousand similar events.

A second, and unexpected, finding of this third study was that the frequency of constraining events was significantly higher in the fall than

in the spring. This difference is revealed in Table 3 which shows the average frequencies for the same group of children during the two observation periods. The differences are demonstrably significant for both boys and girls. Because these differences were unanticipated it is perhaps unwise to speculate for too long on their possible causes and significance. Yet some comment, however brief and tentative, does seem warranted.

Insert Table 3 about here

The possibility of observer bias must be considered first. Perhaps as observers become more skillful (several of the same observers worked on all three studies) they become more sensitive to constraining experiences and more likely to see ones that they might have overlooked at an earlier time. Against this possibility two counter arguments can be posed. First, and most important, is the ease with which these events can be witnessed and agreed upon by different observers. Typically they are not hard to see, even by persons who have had very little experience with young children. The section dealing with reliability in the full report of the first study[4] helps to substantiate this point. Second, if observers became

increasingly sensitive to these events they should do so irrespective of the sub-classes into which the events fall. That is, there should be an increase in all eight coding categories as the observers gained experience. That this did not happen is shown in Table 4, which compares the distribution of constraining experiences for the same group of children at the two time periods. As can be seen, the frequency of "desire vs. desire" conflicts is noticeably higher in the fall, whereas the categories of "desire vs. inability" and "desire vs. teacher overlook" are appreciably lower. Although these two arguments by no means dispel the possibility of observer bias operating to produce the differences between the two sets of data, at least they encourage us to search elsewhere for an explanation.

Insert Table 4 about here

Another possibility is that children are likely to undergo more constraining experiences as they age, because of greater mobility, aggression, or whatever. The trouble with this explanation of the spring to fall increase is that it should have been supported by a significant difference between the three- and four-year-olds in the first study, which it was not. Also, the observations of the four-year-olds on the playgrounds and beaches during the summer

(assuming the equivalence of settings) ought to have yielded frequency counts somewhere between the spring and the fall figures, which did not happen.

A third and, in our judgment, more intriguing possibility is that of there being a seasonal fluctuation in constraining events, related to a change in the familiarity of the environment to its occupants. When the classroom setting is relatively new and unfamiliar, as it commonly is in the fall of the year, we might expect a greater amount of exploratory behavior and, consequently, a greater number of conflicts centering around issues of property rights and territoriality. As these issues become settled and a fairly stable pecking order established, interpersonal conflicts ought to diminish in relative frequency. This decrease would show up, of course, in the "desire vs. desire" category, which is precisely where the greatest difference appears between the fall and spring samples. Although this post hoc explanation must be regarded as highly tentative, it is at least plausible and seems to us worthy of further investigation.

DISCUSSION

These three studies, in concert, do little more than establish the gross parameters of an interesting class of events, but in so doing they give rise to several questions of both theoretical and practical

interest to students of child development and to all who work with young children. A few of these questions bear brief comment here.

The most fundamental issue connected with the methodology used in these three studies is whether such a microscopic perspective is worthwhile. Certainly it does reveal data that are, in a sense, surprising. Unless such an intensive look is taken it is difficult to appreciate how much can happen to a child in a very brief period of time. Yet, at the same time, it must be admitted that many, if not most, of these events, when considered singly, look insignificant and unworthy of notice. The crucial question, of course, is whether the insignificant can become significant by the sheer weight of numbers, in much the same way as infinitesimal particles of silt accumulate to clog a river bed or harmless rivulets combine to produce a flood.

The answer to this question, staying with the analogy of geological events, would seem to require a demonstrable and enduring effect arising from the gradual accumulation of these experiences. But such a demonstration cannot be made by staying at the same level of analysis as that required for a detailed description of the events themselves. Just as it is impossible to predict the direction in which a river's course will be deflected by describing the action of a few particles of silt, so is it foolish to conjecture on how a person's life might be shaped by a few of the forces acting on it during a half-hour

of attendance in nursery school. Even if we were to imagine such a set of forces operating for a much longer period of time we would be hard put to describe their effect without knowing more about the material, as it were, against which the impact is being made. And it is at this point that the analogy with erosion and other physical phenomena breaks down. For humans, as we know, are not passive recipients of experience. Through acts of intention they transform their world while in the process of being shaped by it. Thus, if we are to grasp the long-term significance of environmental constraint we need know not only how often it is experienced by people but what they do about it. If, for example, a child typically retreats or dissolves into tears in the face of abversities of this type we have been describing, it is easy to see how such a pattern of adaptation, given a high frequency of occurrence, would soon become well-known to the child's associates and would be a potent factor in determining friendship choices, the closeness of adult supervision, and other features of the child's social environment.

Whether important qualities of a person's life style actually have their roots in the multiplicity of these mundane events no one knows, of course. Yet it seems reasonable to expect they might. The fact that the majority of these events are barely remembered by the persons experiencing them should not lead us to overlook the

possibility of them playing a causal role in human development. In fact, the heavy emphasis given to isolated and dramatic happenings in many theories of development may have to be modified considerably as we come to know more about the seemingly trivial details of human experience.

At the practical level we are faced with the question of whether we, as adults, can or should do anything about decreasing the frequency of these tiny encounters. The most likely way of accomplishing this end would be to reduce sharply the opportunity for social interaction -- either by keeping children physically isolated from each other or by carrying on a large amount of highly structured and supervised activities during which "free" and spontaneous action is curbed. Such procedures could, of course, have the countereffect of markedly raising the frequency of "desire vs. teacher expectation" encounters while lowering the frequency of those involving "desire vs. desire."

Between the two extremes of isolation and control there are the more moderate strategies of modifying the environment in such a way as to increase the opportunity for one kind of activity (associated with certain types of encounters) over some others. Thus, a teacher might remove the wheel toys and building blocks (frequent sources of "desire vs. desire" conflicts) while at the same time adding to the amount and variety of art materials. Another alternative might be to provide a

superabundance of both supplies and space in the hope that disputes over property rights and territoriality would be consequently reduced. In this connection, however, it is well to remember that the nursery school in which the high frequency of these events was observed is one in which toys and games of all sorts are unusually plentiful.

Thus, by logical reasoning, if not by empirical evidence, the question of whether adults can alter the frequency of these events in the lives of children seems to be answered in the affirmative. Whether adults should attempt to do so is quite another matter. In answering that question we are faced not only with a lack of evidence concerning the effects of such changes but also with the difficult task of deciding if the effects, whether real or imaginary, are desirable. When we think of the complexities involved in making such a decision we probably can be excused for adopting the policy of letting nature take its course. But even if uncertainty or a sense of futility leads us to do nothing we surely cannot help but ponder the meaning of these events for the children over whom we have charge.

Finally, one of the chief values such an intensive and systematic look at the daily experiences of young children is that it calls attention to both the variety and complexity of experience in a way that more casual observation does not. After completing a sufficient number of two-minute observations of individual children the observer becomes

acutely aware of the extraordinary abstraction involved in many of the popular phrases and expressions used by teachers and others to describe what goes on in a nursery school. Labels such as "an aggressive child" or a "shy child" and terms such as "acting out" or "free play" lose much of their meaning when gazing at the minutiae of classroom behavior. The dangers involved in making hasty generalizations about children or even about the "climate" of nursery school rooms become readily apparent. This effect, we believe, is salutary.

TABLE 1

Distribution of Types of Constraining

Experiences in a Nursery School

Type (Desire vs. .....)	Frequency	Percent
Desire	183	31.2
Teacher expectation	148	25.2
Inability	82	14.0
Teacher overlook	79	13.5
Clutter, crowds	28	4.8
Environmental limitation	23	3.9
Institutional restriction	23	3.9
Ambiguous	21	3.6
Total	587	100.0

TABLE 2

Distribution of Types of Constraining

Experiences in Out-of-School Settings

Type (Desire vs. .....)	Frequency	Percent
Desire	103	47.2
Adult expectation	66	30.3
Inability	18	8.3
Adult overlook	18	8.3
Clutter, crowds	5	2.3
Environmental limitation	4	1.8
Institutional restriction	0	0
Ambiguous	4	1.8
Total	218	100.0

TABLE 3

Frequency of Constraints Among Children

in the Spring and the Fall

Period of Observation

		Spring 1967		Fall 1967		
	N	$\overline{X}$	s	$\overline{X}$	s	t
Boys	17	6.88	3.3	9.12	3.5	2.15*
Girls	13	5.00	2.5	7.31	3.5	3.29**
Total	30	6.07	3.1	8.33	3.4	3.48**

* Significant at the .05 level

** Significant at the .01 level

TABLE 4

Distribution of Types of Constraining Experience Among Children Observed in the Spring and the Fall

	Period of Observation			
	Spring 1967		Fall 1967	
Type (Desire vs. .....)	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Desire	53	29.1	119	47.6
Teacher expectation	49	26.9	57	22.8
Inability	32	17.6	24	9.6
Teacher overlook	17	9.3	9	3.6
Clutter, crowds	11	6.0	16	6.4
Environmental limitation	7	3.8	7	2.8
Institutional restriction	9	4.9	12	4.8
Ambiguous	4	2.2	6	2.4
Totals	182	99.8	250	100.0

FOOTNOTES

[1]The research reported herein was performed persuant to a contract from the United States Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

[2]Philip W. Jackson and Bernice J. Wolfson, "Varieties of Constraint in a Nursery School," Young Children, In press.

[3]Because teachers were not present in any of the settings, the categories labeled "desire vs. teacher expectation" and "desire vs. teacher overlook" were changed to "desire vs. adult expectation" and "desire vs. adult overlook." The adults in most instances were parents but they sometimes included older siblings or babysitters. The category "institutional restriction" was never used during the coding process but it was retained because it conceivably could have been relevant in certain instances (e.g. As when a child engaged in an activity that was prohibited by a city ordinance, such as ballplaying, and was told to stop by a life guard.).

[4]Jackson and Wolfson, Op. cit.