Short Research Report

Coping Strategies in Hungarian School-Age Children

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This longitudinal study aimed to analyse what coping strategies 8- and 12-year-old children use in frustrating situations. The participants were Hungarian students and their teachers. In the first investigation, children were aged 8 (N=52), and then they were re-examined four years later (N=45). Two Likert-type questionnaires (teacher and student versions) were developed and administered in the study. The instruments proved to be highly reliable (Cronbach's α: .84-.86). The questionnaires enabled the researchers to investigate the following behaviourally observable strategies: physical aggression, verbal aggression, resistance, venting/crying, avoidance, teacher-seeking, peer-seeking, following the norms and following teacher's instructions. In most frustrating situations, the frequency of physical and verbal aggression and venting increased with age. Both the self and teacher reports indicated that as students grew older, they were less inclined to seek peer or teacher's help. The correlation between the teacher and self-ratings is weak, particularly in the 12-year-old cohort (p < .05).

Keywords: coping, developmental processes, school context, frustration

Introduction

Coping strategies are basic components of social behaviour. Coping strategies greatly influence success in personal life, psychological health, and academic and professional success (Skinner & Saxton, 2020).

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Knowledge of the development of coping strategies is very important because it helps create adequate learning and social environments for children in schools. Most of the research focuses on using coping strategies in adolescence and adulthood, but many components of coping can be developed at an earlier age (DiPrete et al., 2011). For example, Tremblay et al. (1992) showed that in preschool and early school years, children very often use avoidance and venting, seeking the help of an adult or peer, and verbal and physical aggression to solve frustrating interpersonal problems. In our earlier longitudinal research conducted with preschool children, we found very similar results (Zsolnai et al., 2012).

Current Study

In this study, we focus on assessing coping strategies development between the ages of 8 and 12. The main aim of our research was to explore the functioning of coping strategies in frustrating school situations at the ages of 8 and 12. Based on our earlier study (Zsolnai et al., 2015) and the existing literature (Eschenbeck et al., 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), we hypothesised that coping strategies would show significant change with age and that 12-year-olds resort to aggressive strategies more frequently to resolve frustrating situations. We conducted two studies on this subject: the first was in 2010 (Study 1; Zsolnai et al., 2015), and the second was in 2014 (Study 2). On one hand, we wanted to compare the coping strategies of the children involved in both studies. They were eight years old in 2010 and 12 years old in 2014. On the other hand, we sought to contrast the choices of 12-year-olds in the first study with those of the 12-year-old children in the second study.

Methodology

Participants

In our cross-sectional study (Study 1) in 2010, 167 children (52 eight year olds, 57 ten year olds and 58 twelve year olds) participated. Students were recruited from four primary schools in large Hungarian towns, and only children whose parents gave their written consent were eligible. The genders were approximately equal in each age group, but the girl's proportions were over-represented (~5%). The mother's sample represented a range of Hungarian mothers' educational levels in all age groups (elementary school = 15%; higher education qualifications = 12%; the whole sample: $\chi2 = 52.12$, p = .02).

The second data collection (Study 2) was conducted in 2014. This study comprised children who were eight years old in 2010 (Study 1) and twelve years old in 2014 (Study 2). Forty-five of them (22 boys and 23 girls) participated in the second study. The numbers are a little bit less than in the first study for various reasons (e.g., transfer to another school, moving abroad, etc.). Form teachers also participated in the first (N=9) and the second investigation (N=2).

Instruments

In the two studies, the coping strategies were rated by the Coping Strategies Self-Report Questionnaire for Children and Coping Strategies Teacher-Report Questionnaire (Zsolnai et al., 2015) which are based on the Social Behaviour Questionnaire (Tremblay et al.,1992) and the measure tool developed by Fabes and Eisenberg (1992). In our studies, the students' responses were coded into nine literature-based categories: avoidance, following the norms, following the teacher's instructions, physical aggression, verbal aggression, resistance, teacher-seeking, peer-seeking, and venting/crying (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). Students were asked to describe what they do in frustrating school situations (e.g. being hit by someone) and what they do if somebody or something frustrates one of their classmates (e.g. a friend was hit by someone). They could choose among nine possible answers (e.g., I call the teacher; I go away). Form teachers also evaluated each student according to the same items. The two instruments proved to be highly reliable (Cronbach's α: .84 for the children's version and .86 for the teacher's version)

Results and Discussion

The data in the first and second studies (Table I) are very similar. The table contains only those situations where the difference is significant.

Table I. Situations frustrating for the self – self report data and teachers' ratings (based on χ2)

Description	Study 1 (2010)		Study 2 (2014)	
	Significant difference between subsamples – children (p < .05)	Significant difference between subsamples – teachers (p < .05)	Significant difference between 8 and 12-year-olds children (p < .05)	Significant difference between 8 and 12-year-olds teacher (p < .05)
Personal property taken away	8, 10 ↔ 12	n.s.	8 ↔ 12	n.s.
Being disturbed by a peer (while studying)	n.s.	8, 10 ↔ 12	n.s.	n.s.
Being disturbed by a peer (while playing)	8 ↔ 10, 12	8, 10 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12
Name calling	8 ↔ 10, 12	n.s.	8 ↔ 12	n.s.
Being physically bullied	8 ↔ 10, 12	8, 10 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12
Note: ↔ significant difference in strategy choice; n.s. not significant				

Comparing self-reports with the data of the first study shows that the self-ratings of students who were 12 years old in 2014 are similar to the self-reported data of the 12-year-olds who participated in the first study in 2010. Only teachers' ratings were found to differ in one situation. The second study reveals no significant difference in teachers' opinions on the children's strategies to cope with being disturbed while studying.

Coping strategy choices in situations frustrating for a peer (Table II) in self-reports and teachers' reports coincide with the 2010 student and teacher data. The most frequently applied strategy is verbal

aggression, except when a peer is crying, where typical strategies include seeking help and avoidance. In teachers' reports, physical aggression and avoidance are also frequently applied besides verbal aggression.

Corroborating the earlier cross-sectional findings, the second study demonstrated that in most frustrating situations, 12-year-olds tend to resort to physical aggression, verbal aggression and venting (crying and thrashing) with greater frequency, and children seek a peer's or teacher's help to resolve a frustrating situation less and less. These findings somewhat differ from the results of other studies conducted with similar cohorts (Eschenbeck et al., 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), where responses of verbal aggression and negative feelings were less frequent than in our analyses. This is probably rooted in cultural differences and the different features of measuring instruments. However, our findings harmonise with the results of studies of similar cohorts, pointing out that with the progression of age, help-seeking strategies decline (Vierhaus et al., 2007).

Table II. Situations frustrating for a peer – self report data and teachers' ratings (based on χ2)

Description	Study 1 (2010)		Study 2 (2014)	
	Significant difference between subsamples – children (p < .05)	Significant difference between subsamples – teachers (p < .05)	Significant difference between 8 and 12 year-olds children (p < .05)	Significant difference between 8 and 12 year-olds teacher (p < .05)
Peer's property taken away	8, 10 ↔ 12	8, 10 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12
Peer physically bullied by another	8, 10 ↔ 12	8, 10 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12
Peer teased by another	8 ↔ 10, 12	n.s.	8 ↔ 12	n.s.
Peer crying	8 ↔ 10, 12	8 ↔ 10, 12	8 ↔ 12	8 ↔ 12
Note: ↔ significantly different strategy choice; n.s. not significant				

In Study 2, our findings reveal significant differences in form teachers' and students' ratings of coping strategies, and these differences grow with students' age. One possible reason is that the four lower grades of Hungarian primary schools are taught by only one or two teachers. In contrast, teachers only teach students in the upper grades for a limited number of hours per week, depending on their subjects.

Among the family factors (Mark & Pike 2017), we only focused on mothers' educational attainment on children's coping strategies. Similar to the first study, the correlation between mothers' level of education and coping strategies was low. The relationship is significantly weaker at the age of 12 than in the younger age group.

Limitations of the Study

Our study has various limitations. Our sample is not representative, the sample size was small in both studies, and gender differences were not assessed because of the small sample. We will need to do further studies with

larger samples and use gender analyses in the future. Only mothers' highest qualification was examined. Future research will need to plot other family factor variables as well.

Disclosure

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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