

Being Relaxed and Powerful: Children's Lived Experiences of Coping with Stress

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Our aim was to describe and develop an understanding of children's lived experiences of coping with stress. Twenty-three Swedish children, ages 10–12, wrote open letters and were interviewed. The phenomenological analysis resulted in three main themes: (i) depending on oneself, others and the world around, (ii) choosing to be a doer and (iii) being in the here and now. We understood the children's lived experiences of coping with stress as them being relaxed and powerful. The children chose to be active doers or inactive beings and their relationships, as well as their surroundings, helped or hindered their coping. Possible health promotion work is discussed. © 2008 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2008 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction

There has been research done, on an international level, to find ways to help children become and remain healthy (Stewart-Brown, 2001). During the past 20 years, there have also been attempts to specifically help children cope with stress. A number of stress-coping methods taught to children have been found to be successful. Setterlind (1984), for example, found relaxation techniques, including muscular relaxation, autogenic training as well as mental training useful in reducing stress in children. Gilbert and Orlick (1996) concluded that children in middle school can learn to control anxiety and successfully implement stress control strategies. Furthermore, physical activity as a stress reducer has been tested on children and shown positive results (McBride and Midford, 1999). A recent study, which used music intervention in grades 5 and 6, also proved successful in lowering children's stress levels (Lindblad and others, 2007).

However, one can wonder if there are alternative ways to help children cope with stress other than teaching them specific coping strategies. Instead of testing different stress-coping methods and models on children, Richards and Steele (2007) asked children how they cope with stress to illuminate the coping that was occurring naturally. This would emphasise a salutogenic perspective, as Antonovsky (1987) argued that identifying and focusing on healthy aspects of life is a prerequisite in health promotion. In another study carried out by Donaldson and others (2000), over 700 children were asked to complete a checklist to assess 10 cognitive and behavioural coping strategies. The result suggested that examining several different coping strategies in relation to one another offers useful information on children's ability to cope with stress. This perspective widens the scope of how children cope with stress; yet, when using a questionnaire or a checklist, one needs to bear in mind that stress coping is in some way already pre-defined by those undertaking the study. To avoid an already pre-conceived opinion on what stress coping is, letting children's lived experiences illuminate the phenomenon yields a perspective that leaves an openness to their perspective.

Likewise, the concept of stress can be left open to be defined by the children. Therefore, our aim with this study was to describe and develop an understanding of children's lived experiences of coping with stress.

Method

A phenomenological ontology was the point of departure as we aimed at capturing the children's lived experiences. According to van Manen (1990), 'lived experience is the starting point and the end point of phenomenological research' (p. 36). In this study, the lived experiences of the children were gathered through open letters and individual interviews in order to describe and develop an understanding of their coping with stress.

Research context and participants

The first phase of this project was to consider the ethical issues facing us when collecting data from children. According to an ethical law in Sweden (SFS, 2003), informed consent must be collected from children participating in a research project. As they are under the age of 18, the parents must also give their permission. This was done through written information to the parents as well as written and oral information to the children. Before the research project started, it was also approved by the ethical committee at Luleå University of Technology (Dnr 2003075). The first part of the data consisted of open letters, collected as part of a larger phenomenological study in which 96 children from the northern part of Sweden participated. The children were of the ages 10–12 attending fourth through sixth grade in the smallest (rural) and largest (suburban) schools in the school district. They wrote open letters sharing their lived experiences of health and ill health as well as stress and how they coped with it. The phenomenon of stress and stress coping was not defined for the children in order to keep open for the possibility of them providing their own definitions. The children's lived experiences of coping with stress were first captured in the open letters as the following open-ended sentence was used, 'When I am stressed this is what I do to not feel stressed...'. At the top of the page, the open-ended sentence was presented followed by a full page of open lines inviting the children to tell their stress-coping story. To make possible for a wide range of illuminations of the phenomenon coping with stress we selected 23 open letters based on variations in expressions of stress and coping with stress as well as a lack thereof. The 23 children, 12 boys and 11 girls, who had written the selected open letters, were invited and then consented to participate in an individual interview.

Data collection and analysis

According to van Manen (1990), written reflection is a research tool that provides a layer of the life-world visible in a straightforward way. The researchers distributed the open letters to the children in envelopes in order to ensure privacy. In order to increase confidentiality, each child was assigned a number only known by the first author and the child. The open letters were collected, then read, discussed and analysed by both authors. The interviews held by the first author started with asking the child to read aloud their own words in the open letters on how they cope with stress. Questions were then asked to widen the scope of

the child's lived experience of coping with stress. To ensure that the child's perspective was prioritised, the first author made an effort to treat the child as a subject by always first asking what the experience was like for the child, as suggested by van Manen (1991). Questions asked included: 'How did you feel then?'; 'What do you think about that?'; 'What happened then?' and 'Tell me more'. This was done in order to support the children in communicating their experiences (cf. Lippitz, 1983). The 23 tape-recorded interviews were between 10 and 27 min long and took place in a smaller room in each of the schools, where an uninterrupted conversation could be held.

The analysis process inspired by van Manen (1990) was a joint effort by both authors in three steps: first, seeking meaning; next, theme analysis; and finally, interpretation with reflection. The seeking meaning consisted of transcribing the interview tapes to a computer text document and reading the text pertaining to the children's coping with stress in order to obtain a sense of the whole. The second step of the process was theme analysis, which involved trying to determine what the experiential structures that made up the children's experiences of coping with stress were. The textual units from the open letters and the interviews were then organised into different experiences in several steps and finally reduced to broader themes of the children's lived experiences. In the third and final step, we carried out an interpretation with reflection, a process of recovering the embodied meanings in the text in a free and insightful way (cf. van Manen, 1990).

Findings

The children's lived experiences of coping with stress based on the three step analysing process resulted in three main themes: (i) depending on oneself, others and the world around, (ii) choosing to be a doer and (iii) being in the here and now. All three main themes included themes expressing the children's different experiences of coping with stress (Table 1).

Depending on oneself, others and the world around

Tapping into personal resources

The children experienced themselves as resources in coping with stress, describing self-knowledge and learning by doing when trying out what works well or not so well in stressful situations. The insight that stress is a part of life and something that one has to live with

Table 1: Overview of main themes and themes describing schoolchildren's lived experience of coping with stress

Main themes	Themes
Depending on oneself, others and the world around	Tapping into personal resources Being helped or hindered by others Being affected by the surroundings
Choosing to be a doer	Taking charge of the situation Thinking positive thoughts Using external calming tools
Being in the here and now	Slowing down Deep breathing

was described by the children. One child said, '...the stress never really goes away but it can be less stress or more stress'. Strategies to cope with stress were a result of their own logical thinking or could be found by accident as this child did: 'Well I just fell asleep one time and found that it worked better'. The children described their ability to cope with stress as something natural that just happens and that they used a particular coping method but could not explain why or how it worked. Sometimes, ways to cope were taught by somebody else, but most often the children self-taught themselves, as with these children: 'No, nobody taught me'; and, 'I just figured it out on my own'.

The children described the insight that performing under stress is not as favorable as performing when being calm. Some activities were not chosen for the purpose of coping with stress but instead for the activity's enjoyable aspects, promoting calmness in the process: 'I don't do it to feel less stressed but I sort of do it just because I like it'. Whether one had a favorite way to cope with stress or have a number of different methods to relax depended on the situation. Some experienced their methods as effective and some of the ways to cope were effective at first but not very helpful in the end: 'Yes but it is not so good if you like are going somewhere and you want to be on time and you sit down to calm down then you just get even more late and then it is not so sure that the stress goes away because you sit down and try to take it easy'.

All children had experienced stressful situations and described themselves as often stressed, occasionally stressed, able to find ways to become less stressed or being basically calm most of the time. Tapping into personal resources was understood as the children depended on their intuition when choosing ways to cope with stress as well as having the self-knowledge and/or capability to find ways to become and stay calm.

Being helped or hindered by others

Other human beings were described by the children as either a resource to be able to cope with stress better or a problem that increased their sense of stress. Others could, just by their presence, add calmness to a stressful situation. Knowing that the social support was nearby helped the children cope with stress, as expressed by this child: 'I have my friends that support me...when they are nearby I feel really calm'. Those who supported were described as helpful, friendly, funny, easy to talk to and always there when needed. Adults like mom, dad or the school nurse helped the children find coping strategies for especially stressful situations like taking an exam, being the last one picked in gym class, or being picked on when outdoors on recess. Getting a positive response by being listened to and respected was a big help in coping. When there was no forcing or pressure in the social interaction, others helped the children feel calm. Adults and peers were also described as good models when helping the children cope with their own stress.

However, other human beings were also described as a hindrance when trying to cope. One child exclaimed, 'Others stress me!' Being around others who were stressed was described by the children as contagious, i.e. adding to an already stressful situation. Trying to communicate and not being listened to made coping a challenge. Others were described as trying to help but instead being a hindrance; for example one father giving advice that ended up adding to the stressful situation. Peers or adults who added too much pressure in the relationship

were considered a hindrance when trying to cope with stress. The children described how they had to take on adult responsibilities or were stuck in a situation due to someone else: 'I don't know what to do...well maybe if my Mom got healthy... she could drop my brother off so I don't have to stress'. Being helped or hindered by others was understood as either a trigger to reduce stress or to add to it. Interaction with others reduced stress by setting good examples and promoting stress-coping strategies, or hindered such efforts by being poor examples.

Being affected by the surroundings

The children experienced how the surroundings affected their stress level by increasing or decreasing it. They described how the physical aspects of a building were either positive or negative for their stress level. A larger versus smaller room, in relation to the number of people in it, assisted in lowering the stress levels. The colors on the walls also made a difference. As one child explained, '...like maybe red walls would be more stressful than if they are green like now...green walls are calmer'. Being outdoors had either a calming effect or added to the children's stress. Traffic noise and lots of traffic activity made it harder to cope with stress. On the other hand when the outdoors offered fresh air, closeness to trees, hills or water the surroundings provided a feeling of serenity. There were special places outdoors that were specifically helpful when wanting to stay calm, for example a place in the mountains or an area in the woods near home. One child experienced the following: 'I go with my family to our cottage...time does not exist there... we just lie around relaxing...' Being affected by the surroundings was understood as children living in an ever changing environment which is reducing or adding to their stress level.

Choosing to be a doer

Taking charge of the situation

The children experienced coping with stress in situations where they chose to be actively taking charge of the situation. Actions included being physically active as the children described feeling calm after taking a walk or after engaging in a sporting activity. When feeling rushed to do a task, they decided not to watch TV but to prioritise what needed to be done; they choose not to look at the watch while working; or simply just decided to do the task at hand. The children actively took charge of stressful situations by trying harder, for example quite literally running to a plane which was leaving in a few minutes or stealing the soccer ball to be able to score a goal. Prioritising was yet another way of coping. One child explained, 'Well, it's like I do things so I don't wait to do them very long so I don't have lots to do at once'. Minimising the severity of a situation by deciding to stay calm was another way the children chose to cope with stress. One child described, 'I calm myself down and just...don't bother so much'. Instead of dealing with a stressful situation the children removed themselves from the situation: 'I walk away so I don't have to hear the yelling'. The children described how they clarified their boundaries or asked for help: 'I get easily stressed when we are going to the movie theatre and the movie starts in fifteen minutes. Then I usually tell Mom and Dad that they have to drive faster'; and, 'If they work too fast in English class I tell them not to work so fast'. Taking charge of the stressful situation at hand was understood as an expression of how the children choose to act for positive change.

Thinking positive thoughts

Using positive thoughts was a way to cope with stress according to the children. As one child explained, 'I talk to myself to calm myself down'. Different positive thoughts were chosen by the children to fit the situation. When feeling stressed over not having enough time the children altered the situation by thinking that they had more time available than what was the case: 'I pretend I have all the time in the world'. Positive thoughts were also used to rationalise the situation as described by this child: 'I try to calm myself down and think that it is better to be a little late than to stress myself to death'. In situations when the pressure to perform was stressful, the children thought positively to cheer themselves on. When worried about future situations, thoughts were used to reassure themselves of a positive outcome: 'I calm myself down by thinking that it is going to be all right'; and, 'I think that I will make it'. To actively choose to forget by thinking about other positive things which had nothing to do with the stressful situation or problem, was another way to cope described by the children. Coping with stress by thinking positive thoughts was understood as the children using their minds to create a fictional reality or positive picture of the future to calm and motivate them.

Using external calming tools

There were a number of different tools, like props when putting on a play that the children described as helpful when coping with stress. Music had a calming effect although the kind of music they found stress reducing was subjective. Reading a book made the children feel less stressed. One child explained why reading a book was useful as a stress-reducing tool: 'When I read a book, I like it very much and if I do that the world I live in disappears and I am part of the book instead'. Playing a board game or drawing a picture was also described as calming tools. Watching TV helped reduce stress: 'I move my concentration to the TV and then I don't have to think about what makes me feel stressed'. Eating and drinking also provided a calming effect as the children described drinking a glass of water or eating a piece of fruit to feel calmer. Having a material trigger to feel calm helped the children stay calm, as this child explained: 'I hold onto my necklace and take a deep breath'. Using external calming tools was understood as children choosing different aids to help them to reduce the feeling of stress and replacing it with a sense of calmness.

Being in the here and now

Slowing down

In order to cope with stress, the children experienced situations where they chose to be inactive, slowing down instead of trying to keep going or stopping what they were doing altogether. As one child explained, 'I slow down and walk instead of run'. Examples of how the children chose to be inactive included sitting down to relax, laying down to rest, or even taking a nap. One child explained, 'I lie down on the sofa at home and think about whatever'. When stressed over a task, stopping the activity for even a moment helped the children cope, as with this child who described coping with stress while working on a school task: 'I just put down everything on my desk then I sit there a while'. Having recess or choosing to change the present activity to something different were also ways to lower the stress level. Slowing down was understood as the children choosing to lower their pace to calm down or regroup and thus be able to handle the stressful situation.

Deep breathing

Coping with stress by using their breathing was also described by the children. Taking a deep breath or a few deep breaths helped them calm down. The breathing acted as a trigger, reminding them of a calm feeling. At times the children experienced quickened breathing when stressed and the deep breathing became an aid in lowering the breathing frequency. One child explained: 'When I am stressed I take deep breaths because otherwise I cannot breath...' Taking a deep breath became not only a physical tool, but also an actual calming trigger or an attitude changer. Taking a breath made it possible to feel calmness inside oneself. As one child expressed, 'I think it's better not to stress so I take a few deep breaths and calm myself down. It is much nicer and calmer when one is not stressed and it is much more comfortable too'. The children also described, in terms of deep breathing, the feeling of managing their stress due to the calm feeling of being in the moment. Deep breathing was understood as a physical form of help for the children to slow down their breathing and become relaxed as well as helping them to be in the here and now; getting in touch with the calmness within.

Discussion

Our understanding of children's lived experiences of coping with stress was based on the discovery of three main themes: (i) depending on oneself, others and the world around (ii) choosing to be a doer and (iii) being in the here and now. These themes illuminate the children choosing to be active doers or inactive beings. The children's own personal resources were an asset in coping with stress as well as relationships to others and the world around them. However, other people as well as other aspects of the children's surrounding world could also pose problems when they were trying to handle stressful situations.

Our discussion about possible consequences and opportunities focuses on the idea that the children we met in this study were not victims vulnerable to stress but able to find ways to cope. We interpreted the children's lived experiences as them being relaxed and powerful, at least part of the time. At times the children's own resources were not enough, and sometimes others became a hindrance when trying to cope with stressful situations, which added to their stress level. When stress coping was successful, it often involved a state of relaxation made possible by other human beings, who helped the children by setting good examples and supporting stress-coping strategies. This can be compared with van Manen (1991) 'in loco parentis (p. 4)', where the adult is looking at the child as, 'an agent of its own destiny (p. 3)', thereby facilitating a situation whereby a relationship of shared responsibility is possible. We wonder what would happen if we look at children as able to cope with stress and if our role as adults would be to mainly facilitate their coping.

We believe that the starting point for such facilitation, as well as for health promotion *with* children, is the children's lived experiences. When taking a closer look at the lived experiences of the children in this study, we could see them achieving a state of relaxation in the midst of all the stressors present in their lives. In order for stress coping to occur, certain activities became important: They turned off the TV, took a walk or a nap, worked hard on their assignment, voiced their opinion, listened to music or sat down to take a deep breath. By choosing a mental, emotional or physical activity or an external calming tool they reduced the feeling of stress and replaced it with a sense of calmness, making visible a sense of coherence. According to Antonovsky (1993 p. 972), a sense of coherence is expressed as a dynamic feeling of

confidence that resources are available to meet the demands posed by one's internal and external environments. When taking charge of their stress situations it is noticeable that the children's confidence in their actions increased. A person with a strong sense of coherence when coping with a stressor 'may fight, flee or freeze, as she or he deems appropriate to the situation. Put another way, one is not tied to one type of resource' (Antonovsky, 1993). The children's lived experiences shed light on the importance of being able to choose certain activities, building their confidence which in turn adds to the sense of coherence.

By thinking positive thoughts, the children in this study used their minds to create a fictional reality or a positive picture of the future to calm and motivate them. Similarly, children in another study who reported that they said to themselves, 'I can resolve this task' in a school test situation had a low morning increase of saliva cortisol showing low stress levels (Lindahl and others, 2005). In addition, slowing down and deep breathing were physical as well as emotional tools for the children in our study to get in touch with the calmness within. The combination of thinking positive thoughts and choosing to be inactive can, in some ways, be compared with mindfulness, which has been shown to be successful in reducing stress in trials with adults (Williams and others, 2001). Mindfulness is described as involving the learning of 'attentional control to develop nonjudgmental, moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings and body sensations (p. 423)'. Coming to a relaxed state of mind by being in the present, as the children in this study did, can be compared with practicing mindfulness. This can be viewed as an opportunity to develop mindfulness as a stress-coping tool in health promotion activities. Through reinforcing a healthy coping strategy, like mindfulness which seems to be to some extent already present in children, coping with stress can be supported and in some cases re-learned.

The lived experiences of the children in this study illuminate that the world around them was either reducing or adding to their stress level. According to van Manen (1990), lived space is difficult to put into words as the experience of lived space is largely pre-verbal and we do not ordinarily reflect on it. At the same time, we know that the space in which we find ourselves affects the way we feel, or as van Manen (1990) put it, 'we may say that we become the space we are in (p. 102)'. The children's lived experiences point at negative aspects of the environment that produce stress, such as noisy, crowded and uncomfortable places. The surroundings were also a source for stress reduction. The special places the children described are similar to the description van Manen and Levering (1996) offer of a child's secret space or hiding place, '...a place where one feels enveloped in a mood of tranquility' (p. 24). They describe a space where children can conceal their presence, getting away from the noise of living to renew themselves in a self-creating process. Alerby (2004) notes that children think that having a quiet space in school is important to be able to enhance learning and well-being. To create surroundings and an overall atmosphere with these qualities, together with the children, or to help them seek out stress-reducing places, may be yet another important part of the stress-coping puzzle.

Limitations and future directions

As we all exist in the world sharing what Schutz (2002) calls the world of directly experienced social reality, other human's lived experience has a meaning to us without the need to live the other person's life. As researchers, our lived experience of having been children at one point, both being mothers as well as professionals in the child health care field, affected

our interpretation (cf. Christensen, 2004). Although trustworthiness can increase with such pre-understanding (cf. van Manen, 1990), one needs to bear in mind that the meaning one gives another human being's experiences is only an interpretation (Schutz, 2002).

According to Lippitz (1983), researchers need to actively participate and communicate with children, allowing for the opening up of the field, to understand their life-world due to the fact that the children are the key. When working together with a child as a partner, treating the child with respect empowers the child and builds a foundation for mutual exchange (Eder and Fingerson, 2002). This environment of reciprocity is increased by asking open-ended questions, using the children's own words, terminology and language structure (Eder and Fingerson, 2002), something which was done in this study. However, there is a limit to how much exchange could take place in the time we had allotted to spend with the children, which is a limitation with our study.

Another limitation with this study may be the research design, collecting data through open letters. Due to the aim of this research activity and article, we chose to only include the part of the open letter concerning children's lived experiences of coping with stress. As the children shared a number of different experiences concerning their health and ill health, they might have felt unwilling to repeat situations in different parts of the letter. This could be a possible reason why none of the children chose to describe a stressful situation of serious nature like parents' divorce or the death of a pet or a grandparent, experiences which they shared in other parts of the open letter when describing experiences of ill health (cf. Kostenius and Öhring, 2006). Or it might be so that the children in this study, like the children of similar age in another study, perceive stress as daily hassles (Brobeck and others, 2007).

In conclusion, as discussed at the beginning of this article teaching specific stress-coping strategies to children has been shown to be successful in certain contexts. However, according to Nelson and Cooper (2005), a great deal remains to be done. The findings of our study suggest that children can cope with stress and that they are able to verbalise their stress-coping experiences. We see this as an opportunity to shift focus from 'teaching children stress-coping strategies' to 'making room for children's own experiences', viewing their lived experiences as a valuable source for stress coping. This way of looking at children's stress coping, in addition to specific coping strategies, can, we believe, make a contribution to health promotion activities. The challenge as we see it, is to better understand how we as adults (be it parents, teachers, health care staff or researchers) can act as guides and facilitators, by appreciating children's lived experiences and by viewing them as being capable and able to cope with stress.

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