

Roots of resilience: The sex factor

Why do some youngsters emerge from stressful and traumatic events early in their lives relatively unscathed socially and academically? Why do some of their peers, exposed to the same types of events, fare so poorly in comparison?

Psychologists are tracking children and their parents over long periods of time to attempt to gain some insight into what contributes to a child's effective coping with stress. Findings from their studies, presented last week in Washington, D.C., at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, indicate that there are important and puzzling differences between boys and girls in the development of "stress resistance."

Evidence of these differences is contained in a 15-year study conducted by Jack Block and his colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley. An extensive battery of personality tests and interviews, requiring about 11 hours to complete, was administered to 106 children at ages 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 14 and 18. Data collected at each age were used to assign each child a score on "ego resiliency," basically a measure of how dependable, socially perceptive and adaptable to new

circumstances a person is.

The ego resiliency of boys, or the lack thereof, was relatively consistent from age 3 to 18. No such pattern appeared among girls, who showed more transformations in ego resiliency than did the boys over the study period. Block and his co-workers are not sure why this sex difference occurred, but they suggest that family environment and socialization experiences early in life may turn out to be related to girls' ego resiliency during adolescence.

Another project suggests that when infants are exposed to stressful life events, boys' coping behaviors are more powerfully affected by the overall home environment, while girls respond most to their mothers' attitudes and expectations. Byron R. Egeland and L. Alan Sroufe of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis interviewed mothers of 153 infants to chart stressful events in the youngsters' lives, such as hospitalization or parental divorce, between birth and 42 months of age. By the first grade, boys with high levels of early stress scored markedly lower on tests of word knowledge, spelling, mathematics and reading

comprehension than those experiencing low levels of early stress. These problems were not observed among high-stress girls, who were, however, rated by first-grade teachers as more depressed, unpopular and aggressive than their low-stress counterparts.

But some first-grade boys did quite well socially and academically despite early stress, say the researchers. When compared with high-stress boys who did poorly, the "competent" group had a more stimulating and organized home environment with an emotionally responsive and supportive mother. In addition, relationships were more stable among parents of boys who did well despite early stress. The most important factor for first-grade girls who did well despite early stress was having a flexible, self-confident mother who showed considerable interest in their education and communicated positive attitudes about schooling.

These early sex differences are intriguing, says psychologist Arnold Sameroff of the University of Illinois at Chicago, "but the experimental results are puzzles, not answers." An important drawback to the two studies, he notes, is the lack of precise age-appropriate definitions of ego resiliency and competence in the face of stress.

—B. Bower

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