Relationships Between School Hassles and Uplifts and Anxiety and Conduct Problems in Grades 3 and 4

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This study explored whether behavior problems and anxiety in primary school children are related to daily experiences with school. A differentiated view of daily experiences was proposed to examine the relationship between hassles and uplifts in different areas: peers, teachers, schoolwork, and home–school issues. Self-report data from 256 Australian students in grades 3 and 4 underwent correlation and multiple regression analyses. Reports of hassles with school were related to major negative life events as well as anxiety and conduct problems. Hassles with peers and hassles with teachers made unique contributions to the prediction of anxiety and conduct problems, respectively. Overall, reports of uplifts were neither related to major life events nor to reports of hassles or anxiety or conduct. However, the interaction of peer hassles and uplifts contributed significantly to the prediction of conduct problems. The results are discussed in relation to prior research, different conceptualizations of stress, and possible implications for prevention and intervention.

Understanding the sources, nature, and consequences of childhood stress is a central concern for developmental psychology. Faced with many pressing questions from parents, teachers, and counselors, applied developmental psychologists turn to the literature only to find that there is no comprehensive and universally accepted theory of childhood stress. Traditional stress research has been preoccupied with major life events, such as parental divorce, and their association with psychological problems (cf. Johnson, 1986; Thoits, 1983). Investigations of children have demonstrated a cross-sectional association between major life events and adjustment (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Pryor-Brown & Cowen, 1989; Sandler, 1980; Slee, 1993; Sterling, Cowen, Weissberg, Lotyczewski, & Boike, 1985; Work, Parker, & Cowen, 1990). Furthermore, positive associations of major life events with emotional and behav-
ioral symptoms in children have been found in studies using cross-sectional designs (Heubeck & O'Sullivan, 1998; Weigel, Wertlieb, & Feldstein, 1989; Wertlieb, Weigel, & Feldstein, 1987) and prospective designs (Berden, Althaus, & Verhulst, 1990). Specifically, major life events have been related to anxiety (Compas, Slavin, Wagner, & Vanatta, 1986; Quamma & Greenberg, 1994; Swearingen & Cohen, 1985b) and to conduct problems (Chung & Elias, 1996; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Quamma & Greenberg, 1994; Slee, 1993; Sterling et al., 1985; Vaux & Ruggerio, 1983).

Although the correlations between such major events and psychological symptoms were statistically significant, they were often low in magnitude (typically between .20 and .30). This suggests that major life events may only play a small role in the practical prediction of psychological symptoms. In response to this problem and other difficulties encountered within this paradigm, some researchers proposed to focus on daily life events.

### Daily Hassles and Uplifts

Hassles are the irritating, frustrating, and distressing experiences that to some extent characterize everyday transactions with the environment (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Daily hassles for children may include being teased or having trouble with schoolwork. Uplifts are daily experiences appraised as positive, that is, everyday pleasures, such as making a new friend or succeeding with schoolwork (Lazarus, 1984). An advantage of the daily experiences approach over the traditional major life events strategy lies in its consideration of the individual significance of experiences. An experience is only defined as a hassle if it actually bothers the individual or as an uplift if it is actually pleasing. A practical advantage may lie in the greater potential for intervention in daily hassles and uplifts to prevent consequential problems or to enhance functioning.

The superiority of the daily experiences approach has been highlighted by evidence that hassles are more closely associated with psychological symptoms than are major life events. Wagner, Compas, and Howell (1988) argued that hassles are more frequently experienced and psychologically more proximal sources of stress than major life events. Hassles may thus require continued adaptive efforts that may be more taxing overall than efforts directed at coping with a major life event. Hassles have been shown to be more powerful predictors than major life events of psychological symptoms among older adolescents (Wagner et al., 1988) and adults (Burks & Martin, 1985; Chamberlain & Zika, 1990; Kanner et al., 1981; Monroe, 1983; Ruffin, 1993). Based on interviews with children, Lewis, Siegel, and Lewis (1984) suggested that the principle sources of children’s distress are more often enduring problems, such as persistent strains, rather than major life events. Although it is plausible that hassles also have greater psychological significance for children than major life events, there appear to be no published studies directly testing this proposition.

### Consequences of Hassles

Theoretically hassles (and uplifts) can be conceived of as antecedents or consequences. This introductory review concentrates on the first model based on the
preponderance of this view in the literature and to limit the complexity of the presentation. However, readers are encouraged also to keep in mind the consequences of hassles and uplifts (this theme will be taken up again in discussing the results of the present investigation). A positive association has been demonstrated in a number of studies between the frequency of hassles experienced and psychological symptoms among older adolescents and adults (Burks & Martin, 1985; Kanner et al., 1981; Rowlison & Felner, 1988; Ruffin, 1993; Wagner et al., 1988). Hassles predicted the psychological adjustment of adolescents and adults measured in terms of self-image (Tolan, Miller, & Thomas, 1988), as well as mood, well-being, and mental health (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989; Chamberlain & Zika, 1990; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Eckenrode, 1984; Lai, Hamid, & Chow, 1996; Thomson & Vaux, 1986; Wu & Lam, 1993; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987). Investigations using prospective designs have highlighted the possible etiologic significance of hassles for psychological symptoms in adolescents (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans, 1992; DuBois, Felner, Mearns, & Krier, 1994) and adults (Monroe, 1983). Few studies have investigated the association of hassles with anxiety or conduct problems specifically. One exception is the study by Rowlison and Felner (1988), who demonstrated a relationship between hassles and anxiety in adolescents. Another is the study by DuBois et al. (1994), who found that hassles prospectively predict conduct problems among adolescents, consistent with the possibility that hassles may play a causal role.

Despite evidence demonstrating the importance of hassles for psychological functioning among adolescents and adults, they have been underresearched among children. However, two investigations suggested that hassles may also have considerable adaptational significance during childhood. Firstly, Kanner, Feldman, Weinberger, and Ford (1987) found that hassles experienced by sixth-grade students were highly related to negative outcomes, such as anxiety, and moderately related to the absence of positive outcomes, such as self-restraint. Secondly, Heubeck and O’Sullivan (1998) found that bother about school hassles involving peers, teachers, schoolwork, and home were all moderately related to internalizing problems in sixth- and seventh-grade students. Also, bother about peer and schoolwork hassles, as well as frequency of school-related teacher and home hassles, were associated with externalizing problems. Furthermore, from discussions with fourth-grade students, Elwood (1987) concluded that hassles are an important source of stress for younger children, too. Although this suggests that hassles may be associated with emotional and behavioral problems in children younger than 11 years old, this issue has not yet been investigated directly.

Consequences of Uplifts

Although the assessment of uplifts alongside hassles contributes to a comprehensive picture of daily experiences, this approach has been relatively neglected in favor of an exclusive focus on hassles. Although Felner (1984) suggested that individuals’ responses to positive events may have considerable implications for their overall level of adaptation, several studies have yielded mixed results. Investigations of the relationship between positive major life events and psychological problems among children and adolescents have either found a negative relationship
(Chung & Elias, 1996; Rowlison & Felner, 1988; Wertlieb et al., 1987) or no relationship (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1989; Compas et al., 1986; Swearingen & Cohen, 1985a, 1985b). The few studies that investigated daily uplifts yielded mixed results as well. Kanner et al. (1981) found that uplifts were actually positively associated with both negative affect and psychological symptoms for women (but not men). In contrast, Kanner, Kafry, and Pines (1978) suggested that uplifts may have beneficial consequences in reducing the experience of life dissatisfaction and life and work tedium. Finally, Monroe (1983) found no relationship between uplifts and psychological symptoms.

Only one study has investigated uplifts experienced before adulthood. Kanner et al. (1987) found that uplifts experienced by sixth-grade students were inversely related to negative adaptational outcomes, including depression and distress, and that these associations were independent of hassles. Uplifts were also positively associated with adaptational outcomes, such as self-restraint and global self-worth. These findings highlight the predictive potential of uplifts independent of hassles. However, whether uplifts are similarly related to emotional and behavioral problems in younger children remains unclear.

**Stress-Buffering Effects of Uplifts**

Lazarus, Kanner, and Folkman (1980) proposed three psychological functions that positively toned emotions serve in coping with stress: they can serve as breaks from stressful situations, sustain coping efforts, and help restore depleted resources in recovering from loss or harm. Uplifts have been shown to predict positive affect (Kanner et al., 1981). They are thus likely to play an important role in coping and may buffer the presumed adverse effects of hassles on psychological problems.

Several investigations have obtained results consistent with the hypothesis that positive experiences reduce the adverse impact of major negative life events on adolescents (Siegel & Brown, 1988) and adults (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Reich & Zautra, 1981; Rutter & Quinton, 1984). However, Swearingen and Cohen (1985a) failed to find support for this hypothesis. Moreover, Luthar (1991) found the reverse pattern of moderation, consistent with positive major life events increasing the vulnerability of adolescents to the adverse effects of negative major life events on school grades. Although some studies support the proposition that positive experiences operate as stress buffers, no investigation seems to have examined whether uplifts buffer the adverse effects of hassles.

**Relationship Between Hassles and Uplifts**

Theoretically, several possibilities exist regarding the relationship between hassles and uplifts. Perhaps in the simplest case, children’s experiences of uplifts are independent of their experiences of hassles. However, experiencing many hassles may be associated with experiencing many uplifts. For example, both may increase with children’s involvement in activities or with other people. Alternatively, a high level of hassles may be associated with a low level of uplifts. Children who experience many hassles and few uplifts may be particularly at risk of developing psychological problems.
Few studies have investigated the nature of the relationship between hassles and uplifts. Kanner et al. (1981) found that hassles and uplifts were positively related among adults, congruent with Kanner et al.'s (1987) finding among sixth-grade girls (but not boys). In contrast, Kanner et al. (1978) found that the presence of negative experiences, including demands and pressures, was independent of a lack of positive experiences, such as opportunities, rewards, and successes. Similarly, Kanner and Feldman (1991) found no relationship between hassles and uplifts in sixth-grade students, as did Kanner et al. (1987) for boys. It is thus possible that hassles and uplifts are also independent among younger children.

Importance of School Experiences

Previous studies typically assessed a broad and inclusive array of experiences without necessarily distinguishing between different types of major life events and between different types of hassles and uplifts. Nonetheless, associations with psychological symptoms have been shown to differ between different types of negative major life events (Compas, et al., 1986; Newcomb, Huba, & Bentler, 1981) and hassles (Wu & Lam, 1993). Exposure of children and adolescents to stress has most frequently been examined within the domain of family life (Compas, Grant, & Ey, 1994). However, school is also a very important life domain, considering that a major portion of children's waking hours is spent at school and performing school-related activities. Stress associated with school is thus likely to compose a major portion of children's total stress. Large numbers of children report feeling stressed about different aspects of school (Karr & Johnson, 1991) and experience school hassles as bothersome (Heubeck & O'Sullivan, 1998). In fact, Greene (1988) found that school emerged as the most stressful life domain when primary school children were asked to describe stressful events, which also included personal loss, peer, and family domains.

Stress in the school environment has been associated with psychological functioning. As described earlier, Heubeck and O'Sullivan (1998) found that school hassles were related to both internalizing and externalizing problems among sixth- and seventh-grade students. Also, Quamma and Greenberg (1994) found that stress related to school and peer relations was a stronger predictor of anxiety and conduct problems among primary school children than a total stress score including other life domains. Siddique and D'Arcy (1984) reported similar results for adolescents, demonstrating associations between perceived school stress and several measures of psychological distress, including anxiety.

School uplifts have not been investigated previously, nor have school hassles for children younger than sixth graders. However, evidence from bullying studies suggests that younger children may experience more school hassles with peers than older students (Olweus, 1993, p. 15; Rigby, 1996, p. 36). The issue of whether school hassles and uplifts play a role in emotional and behavioral problems among younger children has considerable practical importance, highlighted by its implications for the early prevention or management of psychological problems. Focusing on daily experiences within the school domain is useful from this practical perspective because educational authorities may be able to intervene in these experiences. The
demonstration of relationships between specific types of daily school experiences and emotional or behavioral problems (such as anxiety or conduct problems) among younger children is a first step toward addressing this issue.

Summary and Purpose of the Current Study

Previous stress research with children has been preoccupied with investigating the adverse effects of major life events, whereas research with adolescents has demonstrated the superiority of hassles over major life events as predictors of psychological problems. However, hassles and uplifts and their consequences have hardly been investigated among children as young as third and fourth grade, despite evidence suggesting that such daily experiences may have considerable adaptational significance. Additionally, questions regarding the relationship between hassles and uplifts and the potential stress-buffering effect of uplifts remain unanswered.

The current study investigated school hassles and uplifts experienced by third- and fourth-grade children and their relationships to anxiety and conduct problems. A differential approach was taken in which four domains of school hassles and uplifts were distinguished, that is, daily experiences with peers, schoolwork, teachers, homework, and home and school relations. The following predictions were addressed within each domain:

- Consistent with Kanner and Feldman (1991), it was predicted that the frequency of experiencing hassles and uplifts would be independent.
- Based on prior research on the consequences of major life events and daily experiences among adolescents and adults, it was hypothesized that children’s hassles and uplifts would be related to their anxiety and conduct and that these effects would be independent of how many major life events they had experienced.
- The buffer hypothesis based on Lazarus et al. (1980) was examined as well. It was predicted that the interaction between school hassles and uplifts would contribute to the prediction of anxiety and conduct problems, such that a higher level of uplifts would be associated with a weaker relationship between hassles and the outcome measures.

Method

Participants

The sample included 136 female and 120 male third- and fourth-grade students. Their mean age was 9.23 years ($SD = 0.63$), and their mean standardized score on the NFER-NELSON Verbal Reasoning test (Hagues & Courtney, 1993) was 101.78 ($SD = 13.48$). Participants generally came from intact families (82%). A minority (22%) spoke another language at home in addition to English, most commonly Italian or Indonesian (4.4% and 1.6%, respectively, of the total sample). Most (78%) had attended the same school for more than 2 years. The randomly selected state and Catholic schools were located in lower middle- and middle-class areas of
Canberra and Queanbeyan (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1997, 1998). Education Department, principal, teacher, parent, and student consent was obtained before any testing took place. The final sample comprised approximately 63% of students from 14 classrooms.

**Measures**

**Major Life Events.** The 16-item major life events measure was based on the list of negative major life events compiled by Heubeck and O’Sullivan (1998). One additional item that can cause considerable negative change, “One of my parents lost his or her job when they did not want to,” was included as in Pryor-Brown and Cowen (1989). The cumulated level of major life events over the life span was assessed, following the life-history approach of several recent investigations (e.g., Heubeck & O’Sullivan, 1998; Slee, 1993). Participants responded yes or no to whether the event had ever happened to them and then indicated how much it had bothered them using a 4-point scale (0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = a lot). A total score was obtained by summing the number of events that participants reported had happened and bothered them at least a little.

**Daily School Experiences.** The measure of daily school experiences, Good and Bad Things about School, was a new instrument developed by Heubeck (1995), partly based on research published in Heubeck and O’Sullivan (1998). The scales assess school-related hassles and uplifts in four domains, experiences involving peers (15 items), schoolwork (11 items), teachers (14 items), and home-related issues, namely homework and parent–school relations (11 items). Participants indicated how often each experience had occurred in the last 6 months using a 4-point scale (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). On the hassles scales, participants then indicated how much they were bothered by each experience using another 4-point scale (0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = a lot). On the uplifts scales, participants used the second 4-point scale to indicate how much they were pleased by each experience. Item scores were the ratings of how often experiences had occurred for experiences participants rated as bothering or pleasing them at least a little and were set to 0 for experiences participants rated as bothering or pleasing them “not at all.” This took into account whether the item actually described a hassle or uplift for each participant, because by definition hassles are appraised as bothersome and uplifts are appraised as pleasing (Lazarus, 1984).

For each of the eight scales, the item scores were submitted to a principal components analysis using SPSS version 7.0 (SPSS, 1996). Each analysis generated a one-factor solution. All subscale items had a minimum loading of .40, with the exception of one schoolwork uplifts item, which was subsequently excluded from the computation of schoolwork uplifts scores. The unidimensionality of the eight scales was also supported in another study that included a large sample of fifth- to eighth-grade students (Robb, 1998). Domain-specific school hassles and uplifts scores were obtained by adding up the item scores within each subscale. The internal consistency of the eight scales as assessed by Cronbach’s coefficient alpha ranged from .74 to .92, with a mean of .84 (cf. Table 1).
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha, Correlations, and Standardised Regression Coefficients

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Notes: Anxiety = anxiety score; Conduct = conduct; MLE = major life events; H = hassles; U = uplifts; H-P = hassles with peers; H-W = with work; H-T = with teachers; H-H = with home; HxU-P = interaction of H and U.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Anxiety. The Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978) was used to measure anxiety. The 28 anxiety items assessed the presence of anxiety-related symptoms, including physiological indicators, concentration anxiety, worry, and oversensitivity. Participants responded “yes” or “no” to whether each item was true for them. Anxiety scores were obtained by summing the number of yes responses. The Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale scores have been shown to correlate highly with other measures of chronic anxiety in children (e.g., Reynolds, 1980). The reported internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale has generally been more than .80 (Reynolds & Paget, 1983; Reynolds & Richmond, 1978). Nine-month stability was .68 in Reynolds' (1981) study. Cronbach's coefficient alpha equaled .88 in the current study.

Conduct Problems. A 24-item conduct problem scale was developed for this study, based on the externalizing syndrome scales of the Youth Self-Report (Achenbach, 1991). It included 16 items from the Youth Self-Report aggressive behavior scale, three items from the Youth Self-Report delinquent behavior scale, and five additional items. Participants rated how often or how much each item was true for them in the last 6 months, where 0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, and 2 = very true or often true. A principal component analysis indicated the presence of a single strong factor. Cronbach's alpha exceeded .90. Conduct problems scores were obtained by adding up these ratings.

Procedure

A discussion was held with students that covered the purpose of the project, the consent form, confidentiality of individual responses, and the importance of honest responses. They were told that participation involved two 90-minute group sessions, which included substantial breaks. The first author facilitated the sessions in the students' regular classroom. During the first session, participants completed questionnaires in which the order of the school hassles and uplifts scales were counterbalanced across groups. The remainder of the first session was devoted to exercises that are not the subject of this report (verbal reasoning test). The second session was held either later that day or on the following day. Participants completed the remainder of the questionnaires and the verbal reasoning test.

The instructions for each measure were explained to all participants immediately before completion, and sample items were demonstrated on the blackboard. Participants were provided with pictorial representations of the 4-point scales used in the major life events and daily school experiences measures. To ensure reading level did not impede participants’ abilities to complete the measures reliably, the individual items were read aloud by a research assistant while participants read along silently. However, participants could choose to read alone, and the researcher was available throughout the sessions to provide individual help with reading or comprehending questionnaire items or instructions.

Results

Table 1 presents basic information on the data, including product-moment correlations, variable means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis, as well as Cron-
bach's coefficient alpha for all scales. Some deviations from normality were found, for example skewness in the distribution of conduct scores, major life events, and home hassles equaled or exceeded 1.0 (standard error, .153). Significant kurtosis was also observed in some distributions, for example in major life event scores, home hassles, and especially for the interaction of peer hassles and uplifts (all > 1.0; standard error, .303). To ensure that the study findings were not affected by these deviations from normality, analyses were conducted twice, once with the data as described in Table 1 and after normalizing the distribution of the continuous variables. Although minor differences in the regression coefficients were found, none of them affected the interpretation of the results. Consequently, the SPSS results based on the untransformed data are presented below.

Standard multiple regression analyses were conducted with anxiety and conduct problems as the dependent variables and sex, major life events, domain-specific hassles, and domain-specific uplifts as the independent variables. The initial regression analyses also included the interactions of sex with major life events, hassles, and uplifts, as well as the interactions of domain-specific hassles and uplifts. The scores for variables involved in an interaction were centered around a mean of zero before computing the product terms (Aiken & West, 1991). After the initial analyses, the nonsignificant interaction terms were removed and the regression equations were recalculated. The size of the remaining terms in the equations were hardly affected by the removal of the nonsignificant terms (largest change in a $\beta$ coefficient = .04). In no case did the interpretation of the findings change as a result of the removal. The results of the reduced regression analyses can be seen in the form of the standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$) in Table 1.

Hassles showed nonsignificant or weak negative correlations with uplifts, the largest being the correlation of $-.31$ between teacher hassles and teacher uplifts. The significant correlations involving sex reflected the higher level of uplifts in each domain, the higher level of anxiety, and the lower level of conduct problems, reported by girls than by boys. Major life events showed a positive correlation with anxiety ($r = .36, p < .001$) and a smaller correlation with conduct problems ($r = .17, p < .01$).

As expected, hassles within each domain of school life showed significant positive bivariate correlations with anxiety (range, .31 to .43, $p < .001$). However, contrary to expectations, no significant correlations were found between domain-specific uplifts and anxiety. As predicted, hassles within each domain of school life also showed significant positive correlations with conduct problems (range, .32 to .51, $p < .001$), whereas uplifts with schoolwork, teachers, and home showed significant, although small, negative correlations with conduct problems (range, $-.16$ to $-.24$, $p < .05$). In contrast, uplifts with peers were not significantly correlated with conduct problems. The interaction between peer hassles and peer uplifts showed nonsignificant correlations with all variables except conduct problems ($r = .18, p < .01$).

All interaction terms were removed from the regression analysis with anxiety as the dependent variable. For the final equation shown in Table 1, $R$ for regression was significantly different from zero, $F(10, 237) = 10.36, p < .001$. The independent variables predicted 30% (28% adjusted) of the variability in anxiety. Only sex ($sr^2 = .03$), major life events ($sr^2 = .05$), and peer hassles ($sr^2 = .02$) made significant unique contributions to the regression when the influence of the other variables
SCHOOL HASSLES AND UPLIFTS

**Figure 1.** Interaction of Peer Hassles and Uplifts in Predicting Conduct Problems.

was taken into account. Although schoolwork, teacher, and home hassles showed significant bivariate correlations with anxiety, these variables did not contribute uniquely to the regression.

All interaction terms except one were removed from the regression analysis with conduct problems as the dependent variable. For the final equation shown in Table 1, R for regression was significantly different from zero, $F(11, 234) = 10.31$, $p < .001$. The independent variables predicted 33% (30% adjusted) of the variability in conduct problems. Only sex ($\eta^2 = .03$), teacher hassles ($\eta^2 = .04$), and the interaction between peer hassles and peer uplifts ($\eta^2 = .02$) made significant unique contributions to the regression when the influence of the other variables was taken into account. Although major life events; peer, schoolwork, and home hassles; and schoolwork, teacher, and home uplifts showed significant bivariate correlations with conduct problems, these variables did not contribute uniquely to the regression.

To interpret the significant interaction between peer hassles and peer uplifts in predicting conduct problems, the procedure adopted in studies examining similar hypotheses was followed (e.g., Garmezy et al., 1984; Luthar, 1991). The regression equation was solved four times with low and high values of peer hassles and peer uplifts, with all other values set at the mean. Low and high scores were arbitrarily defined as one standard deviation below and above the mean. Figure 1 displays the obtained values. The significance of the regression coefficient for peer hassles was assessed at these peer uplifts scores, following procedures outlined by Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan (1990). At the low peer uplifts score, the regression coefficient did not differ significantly from zero ($B = -.00, p > .05$). However, at the high peer uplifts score, the regression coefficient differed significantly from zero ($B = .22, p < .01$). Increases in peer uplifts were associated with an increasingly positive relationship between peer hassles and conduct problems, contradicting the hypothesized stress-buffering effects of uplifts.

**Discussion**

**Predictive Utility of Hassles**

This study asked whether school hassles are associated with psychological problems among third- and fourth-grade children. It is the second pilot study conducted
in this area of inquiry. While the first study interviewed pupils in an open-ended fashion to paint a comprehensive picture of their views of what constitutes hassles with school (Heubeck & O’Sullivan, 1998), this second study extended the focus to positive experiences with school and explored the viability of surveying students as young as 8 and 9 years of age about their daily experiences with school. It found that hassles within each domain of school life were related to anxiety and conduct problems. However, when major life events and all domains of daily school experiences were taken into account, only peer hassles uniquely predicted anxiety, whereas only teacher hassles uniquely predicted conduct problems. While these findings vindicate the differential approach of separation into domain-specific school hassles, they also raise intriguing questions about the relationship between different areas of hassles. How, for example, are hassles with teachers mediated by hassles with peers to affect anxiety in primary school children? Questions such as these await further research.

The demonstrated predictive utility of peer and teacher hassles in children supplements the association of hassles with emotional and behavioral problems found in adolescents and adults (e.g., DuBois et al., 1994; Kanner et al., 1987; Rowlison & Felner, 1988; Ruffin, 1993). This study thus implies that assertions concerning the psychological significance of hassles also apply to children (e.g., Kanner et al., 1981; Wagner et al., 1988). In particular, Heubeck and O’Sullivan’s (1998) findings regarding the predictive utility of peer and teacher hassles were extended to a younger age group, reinforcing the presumed importance of school stress (Greene, 1988; Quamma & Greenberg, 1994). The focus on everyday school experiences endows this line of research with the potential for practical application in school programs to minimize hassles and their adverse consequences. However, a cautious approach to these practical applications may need to wait for longitudinal research findings in younger children consistent with the possibility that school hassles may serve a causal role in children’s emotional and behavioral problems (Mitchell & Heubeck, 1999).

Predictive Utility of Uplifts

School uplifts had not previously been investigated. Although school uplifts were unrelated to anxiety, school uplifts involving schoolwork, teachers, and home were inversely related to conduct problems. However, these relationships were weak, and school uplifts did not predict conduct problems after major life events and school hassles were taken into account. These findings suggest that uplifts are not universally relevant to children’s emotional and behavioral problems and resemble Monroe’s (1983) failure to find a relationship between uplifts and psychological symptoms in adults. However, they are incongruent with other studies that did find such relationships in adults (Kanner et al., 1981; Kanner et al., 1978) and with the inverse relationships Kanner et al. (1987) found between sixth graders’ uplifts and negative adaptational outcomes, including anxiety among boys. One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that uplifts may become more important for psychological functioning as children begin the transition into adolescence. Alternatively, the uplifts included in Kanner et al.’s (1987) measure that were
unrelated to school may be the most relevant to psychological functioning of both children and early adolescents. The discrepant results across studies may even be the result of a confounding influence of perceived control over uplifts. Kanner and Feldman (1991) reported evidence suggesting that the mix of controllable and uncontrollable uplifts determines whether their association with adaptational outcomes is negative, nonsignificant, or positive.

**Relationships Between Hassles and Uplifts**

The frequency of experiencing school hassles was either unrelated or inversely related to the frequency of experiencing school uplifts, depending on the domain of daily school experiences. Nonetheless, where significant, the correlations were small and did not exceed .31. These findings, which are generally consistent with Kanner and Feldman's (1991) results, imply that uplifts are not merely the inverse of hassles, justifying further investigation into both types of daily experience.

Hassles and uplifts may be primarily associated with different domains of outcomes. From a literature review, Zautra and Reich (1983) concluded that positive events predict positive criteria of well-being, including life satisfaction and positive affect, but generally not negative criteria, whereas negative events are stronger predictors of distress and negative affective states than of positive criteria. Future research may need to include positive criteria of performance and well-being to gain a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of children's school uplifts.

**Stress-Buffering Effects of Uplifts**

The hypothesis that school uplifts buffer the effects of school hassles was not supported. This is inconsistent with the proposed role of children's uplifts as generators of positive emotions that facilitate coping with stress by serving as breaks, sustainers of coping effort, and restorers of depleted resources (Lazarus et al., 1980). Uplifts may not facilitate coping until adolescence, because previous research that supported the hypothesized stress-buffering effects of positive experiences involved only adolescent or adult participants (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Reich & Zautra, 1981; Rutter & Quinton, 1984; Siegel & Brown, 1988). Zautra and Reich (1983) provided another possible explanation for uplifts having stress-buffering effects, namely that the occurrence of positive experiences improves coping ability by orienting individuals toward personal action and problem solving. This active, success-oriented cognitive set may not improve coping ability in children as it does in adults, because children have less control over their environment or may even lack the perspective to gain a success-oriented set from positive experiences (Swearingen & Cohen, 1985a). Alternatively, it is possible that children's uplifts facilitate coping with major life events but not with school hassles, because the previous research supporting the stress-buffering hypothesis conceptualized stress as major life events (e.g., Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Further investigation is needed, including research into possible differences between coping with major life events versus coping with hassles.

Although peer uplifts did moderate the relationship between peer hassles and conduct problems, the pattern of results was unexpected. Increases in peer uplifts
were associated with an increasingly positive relationship between peer hassles and conduct problems. This resembles Luthar’s (1991) finding on positive and negative major life events in the prediction of school grades and suggests peer uplifts may increase children’s vulnerability to the effects of peer hassles on conduct problems. Under positive social conditions and expectations, negative experiences with peers may become more negative (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 313). In other words, peer hassles, such as being teased or excluded from activities, may be more upsetting and consequently have a bigger impact on conduct problems for children who are accustomed to many peer uplifts. Additionally, the experience of frequent positive events interspersed with negative events may induce perceptions of the environment as unpredictable, as suggested by Luthar (1991). Perceptions of peer relations as unpredictable may increase the likelihood of developing conduct problems. Provided future study replicates these findings, researchers may want to ask why these processes would be limited to the peer domain and only affect conduct problems.

**Methodologic Issues**

A cross-sectional design was used to explore whether the associations involving daily school experiences were worth pursuing in longitudinal research with children. Inherent in cross-sectional designs is an uncertainty regarding causal relationships. Accordingly, the hypothesized model is only one of the possible causal models. For example, it is also plausible that anxiety and conduct problems among children influence their patterns of daily experiences or that psychological problems and daily experiences mutually influence each other. A reciprocal relationship between hassles and psychological problems is consistent with the transactional perspective on stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 293).

The validity of self-report measures is limited by the possible inability or unwillingness of children to report the requested information. Every effort was made to facilitate understanding and encourage honest responses. However, future studies should consider including information from different sources to validate the measures. In particular, a more objective, behavior-based measure of conduct problems may be beneficial.

Concerns regarding the potential for methodologic and conceptual confounding between hassles and psychological symptoms have been raised and debated in the stress literature (Dohrenwend, Dohrenwend, Dodson, & Shrout, 1984; Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985; Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985). Although the association between these variables in adolescents and adults has been shown not to result from such confounds (Lazarus et al., 1985; Rowlison & Felner, 1988), these analyses have not been conducted with children. In the current study, the external incidents included as daily school experience items appear not to overlap in content with the outcome measures. However, the measures may be confounded to some extent by the cognitive appraisal process. For example, the tendency to react with anxiety may be expressed by appraising potential school hassles as bothersome (Heubeck & O’Sullivan, 1998). The requirement that each experience is appraised as bothersome or pleasing by the child for inclusion as a hassle or uplift thus contributes to this potential for confounded measures. Nevertheless, it
also contributes to the validity of the measures. According to the transactional perspective on stress, the classification of experiences as hassles or uplifts independent of the child's appraisal distorts the reality of these experiences (Lazarus et al., 1985). The hassles and uplifts measures were consistent with transactional definitions. However, in scoring the measures, an attempt was made to minimize any potential confounding. That is, children's ratings of how much they were bothered or pleased by each experience were not differentiated, except to identify whether they were bothered or pleased at least a little.

Implications

This study represents the first investigation of school uplifts. It suggests that peer uplifts may increase vulnerability to adverse effects of peer hassles on conduct problems. This calls for further research into the possible moderator role of uplifts in the relationship between hassles and psychological problems among children, with consideration given to the type of uplifts and outcome variables.

More importantly, this study found positive associations of domain-specific school hassles with both anxiety and conduct problems in children that were independent of major life events. This suggests a need for future research using prospective designs to investigate the possible etiologic significance of these everyday sources of school stress. Although no comprehensive and generally accepted theory of childhood stress exists at this point in time, this line of research has the potential to contribute to the development of a theory of school stress and also to a broader theory of childhood stress. Only explicit and well-researched theories should inform applied developmental psychologists when they are called on to provide opinions on school stress and how to handle it. Parents, teachers, and counselors want to know which school experiences children regard as stressful. They ask how often children encounter hassles in their daily school life and what the potential consequences of repeated exposure to these experiences are. One of our, and their, main hopes is that in the long run such knowledge can contribute to the development of prevention programs for emotional and behavioral problems at school. Several studies are currently underway to address some of these issues further.

References


