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What Children Fear

Fear is a normal response in higher animals to an active or imagined threat and comprises an outer behavioral expression, an inner feeling and accompanying physiological changes.¹ These fears develop through the interaction of three kinds of phenomena: those which are innate, those dependent upon maturation and those developed through learning.

Children's fears have been explained by several theories. Freudian and psychoanalytical theory concludes that children's fears are firmly rooted in their emotional involvement with their parents.^{2, 3} The behaviorist position holds that fears are conditioned responses based upon associational ties with a fear which is present at birth. This theory emphasizes learning, unlearning and modification of fear through environmental experiences.^{4, 5} Jung and his followers would explain a fear such as that of animals as an expression of the collective unconscious. Jung suggested that the child goes through a stage that he outgrows as he matures into succeeding phases of the ontogenetic recapitulation of his race.⁶ Gesell, Ilg, Ames and other maturational theorists have based their ideas on the primacy of growth in physical and mental functions.^{7, 8} They conclude that as the child grows up, he seems to need to go through a series of fears which appear at certain ages and later disappear. The Gesell Institute lists several characteristics of each age group.

Maurer, in a study on what children fear, using children aged 5-14, concluded that, of the total number of responses recorded, 50 percent consisted of a single category: animals. This fear of animals decreases sharply with age. A table of responses reported in this study will be presented later.⁹

The purpose of the present study was to determine what children fear and to compare these results with those by Maurer in 1965 to determine if the fears of children previously

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reported are still experienced by children. So that a comparison could be made, the categories were designed to be identical with those used by Maurer.

subjects

The subjects consisted of 106 children of whom forty-six were boys and sixty were girls. In age they ranged from six to twelve years old. All of them were in regular attendance at an elementary school in a middle class suburb of Montreal.

Table 1: Subjects in the Study by Age and Sex

Age	Boys	Girls	Total
6	7	15	22
7 & 8	12	13	25
9 & 10	11	20	31
11 & 12	16	12	28
Total	46	60	106

The number of responses ranged from zero to seven. The average number of responses was 2.25 per child. Inspection of the data showed no difference between boys and girls and no difference between age groups as to the number of responses. Children in age groups 6, 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 appeared to take more time before responding to the questions. No record was made of the time between question and response.

method

Each child was taken into a room where he or she was asked a number of questions. After asking questions such as "What is the most important thing that ever happened to you?" and "What is the most important thing that ever happened in the world?", the examiner queried, "What are the things to be afraid of?" Each answer was recorded on a tape recorder which was clearly visible and answers were later transcribed verbatim. Each child was assured that his answers were confidential. Silent approval and recognition that the fears were legitimate were given by a sympathetic nod. When the child

stopped speaking he was encouraged to go on with questions such as "And what else?" and "Anything else?" If a child did not give an answer, no attempt was made to ask further questions. The direct question, "What are you afraid of?" was not used because children might have regarded this as a form of criticism and may have tended to reply with defensive answers. The same interviewer was used in all cases. The interviewer ascertained the sex and age of each subject, thanked the children and concluded the interview.

Categories of responses were set up according to those used by Maurer. The categories were:

- Animals — includes naming animals in general or one or more specific animals including: alligator, bear, bat, bee, bobcat, cheetah, clam, crocodile, dog, elephant, horse, leopard, lion, octopus, rhinoceros, shark, snake, tiger, wasp, whale and wolf.
- People — includes naming people in general or specific people including: bad men, bullies, kidnappers, doctors, dentists, robbers, scary people, and thieves.
- Dark — includes responses such as dark, walking on road when it is dark, and shadows at night.
- Spooks — includes monsters, ghosts, vampires, werewolves and spooks.
- Natural Hazards — includes storms, fire, water, flood, volcanoes, heights, hurricanes and lightning.
- Machinery — includes all man-made gadgets and inventions such as weapons (guns, knives, bombs), cars, trucks, trains, construction, airplanes, electricity, explosions, hatchet, boat, submarine and spaceships.
- Miscellaneous — includes war, punishment, disease, death, doing something wrong, bad dreams and injury.

results

Based upon the information from previous research, it was expected that a large percentage of responses could be categorized as animals. Of the total 238 responses, 72, or 30 percent, consisted of a single category: "Animals." Other categories and percentage of responses are: "People" — 16 percent; "Dark" — 5 percent; "Spooks" — 6 percent; "Natural Hazards" — 10 percent; "Machinery" — 12 percent; and "Miscellaneous" — 20 percent.

Table 2: Subject Matter of Fears
Percentages*

Age	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Mach.	Misc.
6	32	32	0	23	14	14	4
7 & 8	40	40	0	8	12	8	16
9 & 10	39	23	13	6	23	16	35
11 & 12	29	46	32	0	21	36	64

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied that things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

From the data obtained, the percentage of fear of animals was fairly constant from ages six to twelve (see Table 2). Those within the ages of seven and ten report a greater fear of animals than those at ages six, eleven and twelve. There appears to be a marked discrepancy between these results and those obtained by Maurer (see Table 3). Maurer reported that 80 percent of the children tested at ages five and six reported a fear of animals and that this fear reduced to 68 percent by ages eleven and twelve (see Table 3).

Table 3: Maurer's Results¹⁰ — Subject Matter of Fears
Percentages*

Age	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Mach.	Misc.
5 & 6	80	20	20	33	0	20	0
7 & 8	73	17	3	17	34	34	14
9 & 10	61	42	3	10	35	35	16
11 & 12	68	42	0	0	26	42	26
13 & 14	23	39	0	0	31	46	46

*In each age group, the percentage of subjects who replied that things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

It appears in the present study, however, that the fear of animals is fairly consistent between the ages six and ten and then decreases for children ages eleven and twelve (see Table 2). This overall reduction in fear of animals for all ages (as compared with Maurer's findings) may be accounted for by the increase in the number of children who have pets or by the increase in the number of cartoon shows where animals are seen as friendly and not vicious. It appears that as the child matures, he begins to be able to differentiate "real" fears from "imaginary" fears. And still another viable explanation is that there are greater, more immediate fears held by children.

Fear of the dark in the present study does not seem to occur until the ages of nine and ten and then increases considerably for children eleven and twelve. Although no further questions were asked of the children, it was felt that the responses in the category "Dark" were related to fear of being attacked by people in the dark and not fear of the dark per se. Fear of spooks and the supernatural appears to follow the trend reported by Maurer, but to a lesser degree. Fear of spooks or the supernatural is highest at age six (23 percent) and gradually disappears by ages eleven and twelve. A comparison of Table 2 with Table 3 shows that in the present study, the percentage of responses in the "Spooks" category was lower than was found in the study by Maurer.

Responses in the category "People" appear to reflect the current trend of crime in North America. Thirty-seven replies involved "people who . . . rob you, hit you, fight with you," etc., or specific persons. Eight children responded by saying "robbers," one child said "kidnappers," and one said "strangers." Although this sounds relatively small, 16 percent of all the responses were categorized as "people." This was the third largest category of responses (see Table 4). The category "Miscellaneous," which had the second largest percentage of responses would appear to suggest that the warnings children receive in school and at home, as well as the high rate of crime within most major cities, are having a direct effect upon what children fear. A child hears over and over again "lock the doors on the car," "don't leave your toys outside," "chain up your bicycle," "don't let anyone in the house until you are certain you know them," etc. Statements such as these reinforce the child's fears as well as the fears he gets from emulating his parents who are terribly concerned with theft, kidnapping and assault. With the steady increase

Table 4: Total Number of Responses

Age	N	Natural						
		Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Hazards	Mach.	Misc.
6	22	27	7	0	8	3	5	2
7 & 8	25	16	9	0	3	4	4	7
9 & 10	31	21	8	4	4	11	9	17
11 & 12	28	8	13	9	0	6	11	22
Total	106	72	37	13	15	24	29	48
Percent		30	16	5	6	10	12	20

of crime since the early 1960s, and the attention given to it in the mass media, this result (not found in Maurer's study) was expected.

In the category "Natural Hazards," the answer received most frequently was "fires" — thirteen responses. Several children at age six responded "thunder and lightning." There were a few responses of "water." This type of fear (fire) is the traditional example used to provide evidence that children learn by experience and by teaching. A child who is burnt by a match or fire, as well as the child who is taught to fear fire, would be expected to answer in this manner.

"Machinery" as a category was used because it corresponded to that in Maurer's study and it included all man-made gadgets and inventions, such as weapons (guns, knives, bombs), cars, trucks, trains, construction, explosions, etc. It appears that 14 percent of children at age six fear items within this category. Their responses were "machines," "car," and "bus." The older children included items such as "guns," "knives," "bombs," "tanks," "cars" and "trucks." In addition, the older children qualified their answers by phrases such as, "getting hit by a car," "getting hit by a truck." Within this category, for older children, the emphasis was on violent weapons (i.e. guns, knives, and bombs).

"Miscellaneous" included many items such as war, disease, punishment, separation, death. After analyzing this category, the experimenter decided to divide it into two separate parts — "miscellaneous" and "death and injury" (see Table 5). (This was not done in the first tabulation because of the desire to compare these results with Maurer's.) Clearly from Table 5, fear of death and personal injury was the predominant response within the miscellaneous category. These responses included "death," "injury," "personal injury," "getting hurt," etc. Other responses were "war," "punishment," "separation,"

“not completing homework,” “parents in the hospital,” and “doing something wrong,” with “war” getting more responses than any of the others. This then would leave the category “Miscellaneous” with a total of 9 percent of the total responses and “Death and Injury” with 11 percent of the total responses.

Table 5: A Breakdown of the Category — Miscellaneous Percentages

Age	Miscellaneous	Death and Injury	Total Percentage of Miscellaneous (from Table 2)
6	4	0	4
7 & 8	0	16	16
9 & 10	12	23	35
11 & 12	20	44	64

If we were to add to “Death and Injury” some responses made in the category “Machinery” (such as “hit by car,” “hit by truck”) we would find that combined, this would now be the second highest category for ages nine and ten and the highest category for ages eleven and twelve (see Table 4). From this data, it is clear that one of the major fears of children between ages nine and twelve is the fear of personal injury and death. This is a most significant finding. While fear of animals is “somewhat imaginary” (especially in the cases of caged animals in our society), fear of injury and death is not.

It was found that 68 percent of the animal responses can be considered a “real” fear for those children tested within this study. This does not mean that the other responses do not represent “real” fears, but that it is highly unlikely that a child would ever encounter certain animals (e.g., lions, tigers) unless in a zoo or circus where the animals are caged. The responses which were considered to represent a “real” fear included “dogs,” “horses,” “cats,” “bees,” “wasps,” “snakes,” “animals” and “wild animals.” Since animals and “wild animals” do not tell us specifically which animals were being referred to, we included these responses with those of animals that a child could possibly encounter. Thirty-two percent of all the animals mentioned would never be seen on a street within a large city (i.e. bears, lions, tigers, etc.).

This suggests that one of the common assumptions that parents have about fears being unwarranted seems to be

disproven. This can be demonstrated by adding up the total percentage of responses which might have a "real" reason to be feared. This would include 68 percent of the category — "Animals" — which might be fearful for children, the categories "People," "Natural Hazards," "Machinery," and "Miscellaneous" — the total percentage would be approximately 78. If we were to include all the responses within the category "Animals" as real fears, the total of imaginary fears would be 11 percent. Therefore, many of the fears children have are ones which are "real" and probably taught to them by parents, teachers and through experience.

Table 4 shows the total number of responses given in any category. It was hypothesized that certain categories lent themselves to a perseveration effect. Upon analysis of the data, it was found that when children started to name one animal as a fear they continued and mentioned several. It was believed that this effect could greatly influence the number of responses within a category. Table 6 represents the total number of initial responses given in each category.

Table 6: Initial Responses*

Age	Animals	People	Dark	Spooks	Natural Hazards	Mach.	Misc.	No Resp.
6	7	5	0	3	1	3	1	2
7 & 8	8	7	0	2	3	2	1	2
9 & 10	10	2	4	2	6	1	5	1
11 & 12	3	7	6	0	3	2	7	0

*In each age group, the number of subjects who initially replied that things to be afraid of were such as to be classifiable under the categories.

We cannot infer that the initial response is the one children fear the most. When Table 6 is compared with Table 4, it appears as if perseveration may have occurred with respect to the category "Animals." Unfortunately, no data on initial responses was provided by Maurer.

conclusions

Based upon previous research, it was expected that a large percentage of responses to the question, "What are the things

to be afraid of?" could be categorized as animals. The fear animals was fairly constant from ages six to twelve. The fear of animals was not as pronounced as in Maurer's study, nor was there a reduction as a function of the child's age. Fear of the dark and fear of spooks account for only 11 percent of all responses.

The things children are taught to fear (traffic, strangers, kidnappers, fires and burglars) at home and school, as well as the high rate of crime within most major cities appear to have a direct effect upon what children fear. As children mature, they become more fearful of personal injury and death. In addition, they begin to fear violent weapons such as knives, guns and bombs. Their fears become tied directly or indirectly to their central concern. A most significant result of this study was the finding that fears of children are not unrealistic nor are most of them imaginary. Children's fears are learned. They are taught by their parents and teachers as well as learned through experience.

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