

The Influence of Gender and Age on the Specific Phobias Among Saudi Children

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Background: It is normal for children to have specific fears which widely influenced by gender, age, developmental stage and socioeconomic status.

Aim of the study: To probe the gender and age influence on phobias in a sample of school Saudi children.

Subjects & Methods: 340 Saudi pupils attending public primary schools in Riyadh city in KSA were enrolled. Arabic phobia scale was used.

Results: 155 were boys and 185 were girls, (Age range was from 8 to 15). Girls obtained significantly higher mean scores than boys in the total score and all subscales except in social phobia. In younger age

group (Boys and girls), the most frequent type of phobia was the height and the least one was agoraphobia and social phobia. The older age boys reported phobia of darkness to be the most frequent, while phobia of height remained the commonest among older girls. Phobias decrease with the increasing of age. Younger children had a higher level of phobia.

Conclusion: Girls report more phobia than boys and complain of phobia of height more than animal and darkness, while boys suffer from phobia of darkness followed by height and then animal. Phobias tend to decline with age.

Keywords: Phobia, Gender, Children.

Abbreviations:

KSA: Kingdom Saudi Arabia

SD: standard deviation

ECA: Epidemiologic Catchment Area

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INTRODUCTION

It is normal for children to have specific fears (Merckelbach, et al. 1996). Frequency of fear varies widely and its expression is influenced by factors as gender, age, developmental stage and socioeconomic status (Moussa, et al. 1999).

There are predictable changes in the content of normal fear over the course of development. Such changes are characterized by a transition from infant fears which are related to immediate, concrete and prepotent stimuli, and which are largely non-cognitive, to fears of late childhood and adolescence which are related to anticipatory, abstract, and more global stimuli and events (Gullone, 2000).

It is only by thoroughly understanding the nature of normal and pathological emotion that we will be able to cope effectively with phobic disorders, which are the most common psychological disorders known to humans (Rapee and Barlow, 2001). The prevalence rates vary from 4.7% to 11.3%. This wide variation has been attributed to difficulties in defining when a fear becomes a phobia (Hwu, et al. 1989).

Specific phobia indeed occurs much more commonly than its prevalence in clinical settings would suggest. Numerous studies have confirmed that specific phobia

is more common in women than in men (Fredrikson, et al. 1996).

This study tries to highlight the issue of phobia among Saudi children, draw attention to its impact, early intervention and prevention, so that the life course of children and subtle but extensive interference that these disorders cause could be reduced from an early age. As mentioned by (Boyd, et al. 1990) only less than quarter of phobics receives treatment. This is an attempt to probe gender and age influence on specific phobias in a sample of Saudi children.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

As a representative sample, 402 Saudi pupils attending public primary and preparatory schools (Grades 3 to 6) in Riyadh in KSA were enrolled in this study. Two schools were randomly chosen to represent boys and another 2 for girls.

Phobia scale for children (Arabic version) (El-Taiab, 1999): A 20 item scale to be answered yes or no. To analyze the data collected, the questions were sub grouped according to the phobia they probed. As a result 5 phobias were obtained: Darkness, animal, agora/cloastrophobia, heights and social ones. A