Children’s Vulnerability to Stressful Life Events in Mothers’ Eyes: Effects of Gender and Parental Experiences

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Although the professional literature indicates greater vulnerability to stress among boys than girls, research on stereotypes and gender typing in socialization offers indirect evidence of a contrary belief among parents. In order to assess sex differences in vulnerability directly, 80 Israeli middle-class mothers of elementary school children were asked to predict the difficulty that low- and high-stress life events would pose for child protagonists in eight vignettes. Sex of child was manipulated by gender label denotation. Results indicated that mothers of boys predicted greater child difficulties with stress than mothers of girls. They also predicted that boys would have more difficulty than girls, a sex difference that did not appear among mothers of girls. The results suggest that maternal perceptions of sex differences in vulnerability are influenced by observation of their own children under stress. Further, professional opinion and lay wisdom as to actual male vulnerability are not necessarily at loggerheads.

The debilitating effects associated with stressful life events arising in children’s lives are recognized by mental health professionals and lay persons alike (Felner, 1984; Johnson, 1982). Yet professional and lay psychology appear to differ over boys’ and girls’ relative vulnerability to life’s misfortunes. Although professional texts suggest that boys are more vulnerable than girls, common stereotypes tend to portray boys as made of sterner stuff. The present study attempts to assess empirically sex typing

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in mothers’ perceptions of child vulnerability and its relation to their own experience of rearing boys and girls.

The heightened vulnerability of young boys to life’s exigencies is reflected in a range of empirical works. Epidemiological studies of psychopathology (Eme, 1979; Rutter & Garmezy, 1983) indicate that, prior to adolescence, boys are more prone to mental health problems than girls. Boys are also more vulnerable to individual life events (e.g., separation, divorce, or family moves evoke greater long-term disturbance among boys than girls) as well as the aggregation of life events (Hoffman, Levy-Shiff, & Ushpiz, in press).

Empirical data notwithstanding, it has been suggested that boys are stereotypically viewed as more resilient. Adults tend to label boys as more sturdy, self-confident, and self-reliant, whereas girls are labeled more fragile, fearful, and dependent (cf. Williams & Best, 1982, for a review of gender stereotype literature). Research on gender typing in socialization reveals that parents believe girls require aid in times of difficulty, but that boys should “tough it out” independently (cf. Block, 1978, and Huston, 1983, for reviews).

Only limited attempts (Fagot, Kronsberg, & MacGregor, 1985; Kronsberg et al., 1985) have been made to assess parental perceptions of vulnerability directly. These have involved showing parents videotapes or pictures of very young children in situations of clear risk (e.g., riding a tricycle in the street). No consistent differences in the quality of parental response to boy or girl protagonists have been found.

Review suggests that gender differences may have been ameliorated by the focus on infants and toddlers in situations of imminent danger. Kronsberg et al. (1985) argue that the vividness of risk with such a relatively helpless population may have limited reflection over personal sources of resilience or vulnerability. As such, the present study was addressed at assessing the perceived vulnerability of an older elementary school age population facing difficult but nonthreatening life events and changes common to this group.

In this study, mothers were asked to predict how well child protagonists would deal with a range of common life events, ranging in relative degree of stress. Following the literature on stereotypic gender typing and socialization, it was hypothesized that mothers would view boys as less vulnerable than girls. Further, in accord with the position that vividness of contextual risk submerges individual considerations, it was expected that the perception of sex differences would drop in cases involving child confrontation with high- rather than low-stress events.

A second study focus dealt with maternal factors that might influence the perception of sex differences. Of particular interest was the issue of