

## LIFE EVENTS AS STRESSORS WITH GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

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The present study investigated the perceived stressfulness of life events by 53 gifted adolescents in a rural southeastern area. In comparison to previous samples, these youths rated life events as similar except for items related to achievement, social status, and career aspirations, which they rated as more stressful. Pressure to perform was rated as stressful, but actually being labeled gifted was rated as a relatively low stressful event.

Stress in children and adults has become a popular topic in both professional and secular literature. Research suggests that there is a relationship between stressful events and the physical and psychosocial development and adjustment of children (Coddington, 1972a,b; Gersten, Langner, Eisenberg, & Orzeck, 1974; Yamamoto, 1979). One group of students who are exposed to stressful situations is the intellectually gifted. In the past (Terman, 1925), it has been suggested that intellectually gifted students, in general, have positive mental health. In fact, the 1974 Pennsylvania state guidelines for gifted identification included a criterion for superior personal and social adjustment (see Ferguson, 1981). Ferguson challenges the notion that gifted children "can handle more stress (especially academic stress) than the non-gifted." In fact, it has been suggested in recent literature that additional stressors placed on children who are gifted may lead to emotional or discipline problems (Johnson, 1981; Leaverton & Herzog, 1979).

Clemens and Mullins (1981), in an extensive review of the literature, have suggested that there are several factors relating to stress in gifted youth. Among the factors are: the high expectations for these students held by family and society; the school curriculum, which is repetitive and nonchallenging; and the lack of organization and sequencing between regular education and gifted education. Other sources of stress, including poor peer relationships and lack of appropriate social skills (due to inability to communicate with "average" peers) were cited.

A review of the literature on stress and the gifted revealed that only one investigation has employed a standardized inventory to determine the sources of stress with the gifted. Ferguson (1981) employed the Adolescent Life Change Event Scale (ALCES) (Yeaworth, York, Hussey, Ingle, & Goodwin, 1980). Yeaworth et al. determined items important to adolescents through pretest and then had 207 white Ohio adolescents (age 11-18) rate the items as to stressfulness. Subjects were self-selected. (See Yeaworth for a complete description of the scale's development.)

Ferguson (1981) expanded the instrument by including two items on suicide. Subjects indicated how stressful certain situations would be if they occurred in their lives and the frequency of occurrence. Items are listed in Tables 1 and 2. Ferguson administered it to a sample of gifted (75 students from randomly chosen classes) and nongifted (25 students from intact classes) adolescent white ninth graders in an urban school in Pennsylvania. Ferguson concluded that the gifted had not had as many stressful events in their lives as nongifted, but that they were just as sensitive to the occurrence of the events. It was also concluded that the rank order of the scale items was reliable across his gifted and nongifted samples, as well as Yeaworth's sample.

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Another instrument to measure stress in youth was designed and validated by Coddington (1972b). The Life Events Scale for Adolescents (LES-A) was developed by modifying an adult stress scale by having parents and pediatricians estimate the stressfulness of life events for students of varying ages and then validating the scale by having 3526 adolescents rate the stressfulness of events. Further research indicates adequate reliability and validity. (See Coddington, 1972b, for a complete description of the scale's development.) Intended use of the scale is to have adolescents determine whether a particular event has happened to them within a certain time period and then to determine whether the adolescents have experienced stress above a criterion level, in which case behavioral symptomatology is predicted. In the present study, however, the standardization sample's rating of stressful events was compared to the present gifted sample's ratings to determine similarity of perception of stress.

The present investigation was undertaken to determine the actual sources of stress in gifted adolescents in a rural southeastern area of the country, as measured by the ALCES and the LES-A. These results were then compared to those of gifted and nongifted youth in a suburban Philadelphia school district. The level of stressfulness of additional items pertaining specifically to being gifted also was investigated.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 53 white 7th- through 12th-grade students attending a program for gifted children at a southeastern university. An intelligence quotient of 120 or above on the Stanford Binet or on any of the three scores from the WISC-R was required for program eligibility. The students (31 males and 22 females) ranged in age from 12 to 17, with an average age of 13.25 years. The present sample is comparable to the Yeaworth (1980), Coddington (1972b), and Ferguson (1981) samples except for geographic location and the large sample size employed by Coddington (1972a).

### *Procedure*

The adolescents were administered the LES-A and the ALCES in a group session by one of the investigators, who ensured them of the confidentiality of their responses. Additionally, the youth were asked to rate six items devised by the present investigators that pertained specifically to giftedness. The particular items were chosen through a review of gifted literature (e.g., Clemens & Mullis, 1981) and were validated through discussion with a class of secondary, gifted youth.

The mean rating of each item was calculated; based on the mean rating, a rank order of items for each scale was established. Actual frequency of occurrence of each event for the present sample was tallied and rank ordered. The data were subjected to Spearman rank order correlation procedures to compare present rank orders to previous gifted and nongifted data. Spearman correlations were used to assess the relationship between the rating of the events and the actual frequency of occurrence of the events within the present sample. The additional items pertaining to giftedness were not included in the formal analyses. The rank order of these items in relation to existing items was analyzed by adding them to the rank order determined for both the LES-A and ALCES after formal analyses were performed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The rank order of stress ratings and event frequency for both the LES-A and the ALCES are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Also presented are the rank orders of previous

Table 1  
*Comparison of Responses on the Life Events Scale for Adolescents*

	Coddington Stressfulness Rank Order		Present Gifted Sample	
	Rank Order	Stressfulness	Rank Order	Event Frequency Rank Order
Death of a parent	1		1	43.5
Death of a brother, sister	2		2	38.0
Appearance in a juvenile court	37		3	43.5
Failing a grade in school	27		4	38.0
Death of a grandparent	5		5	2.0
Death of a close friend	44		6	19.0
Suspension from school	28		7	43.5
Being sent away from home	42		8	48.5
Divorce of your parents	3		9	29.0
Becoming involved with drugs	45		10	48.5
Being responsible for car accident	33		11	28.0
Getting pregnant or fathering pregnancy	48		12	48.5
Marital separation of your parents	4		13	26.5
Failing to achieve something you really wanted	38		14	9.5
Being invited by a friend to break the law	36		15	25.0
Loss of a job by father or mother	10		16	38.0
Hospitalization of a parent	6		17	3.0
Major decrease in your parents' income	12		18	33.0
Start of a new problem between you and your parents	23		19	8.5
Being told to break up with boy/girlfriend	22		20	26.6
Start of a new problem between parents	13		21	23.0
Hospitalization of a brother or sister	9		22	14.5

Remarriage of a parent to a stepparent	7	23	33.0
Move to a new school district	26	24	21.0
Deciding to leave home	41	25	43.5
Breaking up with a boy/girlfriend	21	26	6.0
Being hospitalized for illness or injury	43	27	16.5
A new adult moving into your home	16	28	37.0
Change in father's job—less time at home	15	29	23.0
Getting married	49	30	43.5
Going on first date of your life	19	31	9.5
Beginning first year of senior high school	25	32	19.5
Finding a new dating partner	20	33	9.5
Mother beginning to work outside home	17	34	32.0
Graduating from high school	29	35	48.5
Stopping the use of drugs	46	36	43.5
Birth of a brother or sister	8	37	12.5
Getting your first permanent job	40	38	29.5
Becoming an adult member of a church	34	39	12.5
Getting your first driver's license	32	40	16.5
Outstanding personal achievement	50	41	4.0
Getting a summer job	39	42	6.0
Major increase in parents' income	11	43	33.0
Being accepted at college of your choice	30	44	38.0
Being invited to join social organization	35	45	19.0
Recognition for excelling in sports or other activity	31	46	6.0
Finding an adult who really respects you	47	47	23.0
Being told you are attractive by a friend	18	48	1.0
End of a problem between you and parents	24	49	14.5
End of a problem between your parents	14	50	33.0

Table 2  
Comparison of Responses on the Adolescent Life Change Event Scale

	Previous Samples			Present Gifted Sample		
	Yeaworth	Stressfulness		Stressfulness Rank Order	Event Frequency Rank Order	
		Rank Order	Ferguson nongifted			
A parent dying	1.0	1.0	1.0	1	27.0	
Brother/sister dying	2.0	2.0	2.5	2	23.0	
Being arrested	6.0	6.5	4.0	3	31.0	
Failing a grade in school	7.0	8.5	7.0	4	23.0	
Failing one or more school subjects	4.5	4.0	5.0	5	31.0	
Close friend dying	3.0	3.0	2.5	6	11.0	
Alcohol problem in the home	8.0	11.0	8.0	7	15.5	
Considering suicide		15.0	15.5	8	18.5	
Parent/relative gets very sick	10.0	5.0	9.0	9	4.0	
Friend considers/attempts suicide		4.0	4.0	10	27.0	
Divorce of parents	4.5	6.5	6.0	11	18.5	
Quitting school	14.0	18.5	13.5	12	31.0	
Getting into drugs/alcohol	10.0	16.0	8.0	13	31.0	
Marital separation of parents	4.5	6.5	6.0	14	15.5	
Close girlfriend pregnant	15.5	10.0	13.5	15	23.0	
Losing a special pet	10.0	12.5	11.0	16	2.0	
Fighting with parents	17.5	16.0	18.0	17	8.0	
Losing a job	12.5	16.0	20.5	18	31.0	
Parent loses job	15.5	12.5	20.5	19	23.0	
School discipline problem	19.5	27.0	19.0	20	12.5	

New adult family member	26.0	28.0	21	23.0
Starting new school	21.0	17.0	22	15.5
Body image discomfort	19.5	22.0	23	10.0
Breaking up with a close boy/girlfriend	12.5	10.0	24	6.0
Dating problems	28.5	23.0	25	6.0
Moving to a new home	22.0	12.0	26	12.5
Getting hurt or sick	17.5	15.5	27	3.0
Menstrual problems	25.0	24.0	28	27.0
Fighting with siblings	24.0	25.0	29	1.0
Change in appearance	23.0	26.0	30	6.0
Mother getting pregnant	28.5	30.0	31	23.0
Getting married	31.0	31.0	32	20.0
Starting a job	27.0	27.0	33	15.5
Making new friends	30.0	29.0	34	9.0

data used for comparison. Results of the Spearman rank order correlations, both for comparison of the present sample to previous gifted and nongifted data and comparison of the rating to actual occurrence of events, are presented in Table 3.

The results of a comparison between the LES-A rank order as presented by Coddington (1972b) and the rank order as rated by the present gifted sample indicates that the two rank orders are not significantly correlated. An examination of item rank differences indicates that the present sample ranked items differently than did the Coddington sample in three respects. First, the gifted children rated as more stressful items pertaining to achievement. For example, failing a grade in school was rated as more stressful than death of a grandparent or close friend. Failing to achieve something really wanted also was rated as highly stressful, above hospitalization, family problems, and peer problems. Second, the gifted rated as highly stressful events that would impede social acceptance and/or career aspirations. Some of these items are: appearance in court, being invited to break the law, suspension from school, getting pregnant or fathering pregnancy, and becoming involved with drugs. Third, the gifted students rated as less stressful more positive events, such as end of problems, increase in parent's salary, and birth of a sibling.

Table 3  
*Relationship of the Present Gifted Sample's Rank Order of Events to Previous Samples and Frequency of Event, Using Spearman Correlation Coefficients*

	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Life Event Scale for Adolescents		
Present Gifted with Coddington Rank Order	.1843	< .10, NS
Adolescent Life Change Event Scale		
Present Gifted with Yeaworth Rank	.8644	< .001
Present Gifted with Ferguson's nongifted	.9530	< .001
Present Gifted with Ferguson's gifted	.9599	< .001
Present Gifted Sample Stress Rating with Frequency of Occurrence of Events for the Sample		
Life Event Scale for Adolescents	-.36	.009
Adolescent Life Change Event Scale	-.43	.005

Results of comparisons between ratings of the ALCES by the present gifted sample and previous gifted and nongifted samples indicate that the rank orders are significantly correlated. That is, the present gifted sample ranked ALCES items in a similar fashion as did previous samples. The ALCES does not adequately assess the areas of achievement and positive events. Items such as failing a grade and being arrested, which are rated low on the LES-A, are rated as more highly stressful on the ALCES. Thus, these items are rated on the ALCES similarly to the ratings by the present gifted sample. While a statistical comparison of the two instruments would be interesting, it is not the focus of this article.

Ratings of events and actual occurrence of events were significantly negatively correlated for both the LES-A and the ALCES. That is, events that were rated as the most stressful were the least likely to have actually occurred. These most stressful items included death of a parent or sibling, being arrested, school failure or suspension, and

considering suicide. These results indicated that the gifted youth are aware of the relative stressfulness of events, even though they have not actually experienced many of them. One item that was rated as highly stressful and also had a high frequency of occurrence was death of a grandparent. This experience may have allowed the students an opportunity to understand how it would feel to lose other family and friends.

The rank order of the items pertaining to giftedness rated by the present gifted sample is presented in Table 4. Each item's rank order as if it were included in the LES-A and ALCES also is presented. The results of this procedure indicate that these gifted students rated "gifted items" about midway on both stress scales. That is, they perceive problems related to being gifted as moderately stressful. Interestingly, they rated "pressure from parents to perform academically" as more stressful than "breaking up with a boy or girlfriend" or "being hospitalized." They also rated "not being able to take courses you want" as more stressful than "being hospitalized," "hospitalization of a brother or sister," or "remarriage of a parent." Pressure from teachers and problems with peers were rated as less stressful than pressure from parents. Actually being labeled gifted was rated as a relatively low stress event.

Table 4  
*Rank Order of Items Pertaining To Giftedness*

	Actual Rank Order	Rank Order in LES-A	Rank Order in ALCES
Not being able to take courses you want	1	22	21
Classroom instruction below your level of ability	2	24	22
Pressure from parents to perform academically	3	28	26
Pressure from teachers to perform academically	4	32.5	30
Problems with nongifted peers about your being gifted	5	32.5	31
Being labeled gifted	6	36	38

In summary, gifted are similar to other samples in their perceptions of stressors. However, they perceive as more stressful events related to achievement, social status, and career aspirations. They rate as least stressful positive events. These gifted children are aware of the stressfulness of major events such as death, even though they have not experienced them. Pressure related to being gifted is perceived as moderately stressful, while being labeled gifted is not perceived as stressful.

It should be kept in mind that gifted students react to stress in a similar fashion as do nongifted students and, in addition, are moderately stressed by events associated with being gifted. Persons involved with gifted youth should be aware of the unique stressors they experience and should help them perform up to their potential without the increased burden of excessive pressure.

Several ways to eliminate stress in gifted youth have been set forth. Williams (1979) developed a six-step cognitive model for coping with stress. Murdock (1979) suggested cognitive mediation as a relaxation technique for the gifted who had experienced stressful events. Frazier and McCannon (1981) supported the use of bibliotherapy. Karnes, Oehler-Stinnett, and Jones (in press) successfully employed EMG frontalis biofeedback training with upper elementary, intellectually gifted to reduce tension. These techniques may



be successfully employed by educators and therapists who are interested in helping gifted students learn adaptive methods of coping with stress.

This study is limited, as subjects were self-selected, a limited age range was examined, no statistical examination of the scores derived from the scales was conducted, and data are correlational in nature. Directions for future research include an examination of the usefulness of the LES-A and the ALCES in diagnosing high levels of stress in gifted children and further validation of the items pertaining to giftedness.

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