Original Article

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, drag 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/claustrophobia, heights and social ones. A

score>9 (Of the total score) is considered high phobic (i.e. severer and may have multiple forms of phobia).

The aim of the study was explained to the pupils and their right to choose whether to participate or not was clearly emphasized; however, 62 (Out of 402) of the children either chose not to write their identification data (Age and gender) or their parents refused their participation in the study. So, they will be missing from all computations involving.

The test was administrated in small groups. One of the trained school staff would read the question while the others move around the group to make sure the question was heard, read and answered. Children who experienced difficulties were individually assisted and given enough time to answer the questionnaire. The participants were trained to help the children without influencing their answers.

Statistical analysis:
The results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science for Windows version 12 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Numerical data were expressed as a mean and standard deviation (SD) and were analyzed using unpaired, two-tailed t-test. Categorical data were expressed as number and percentages and compared using Chi square test. P value of 0.05 was used as the level of significance.

RESULTS

340 pupils completed the questionnaire. We told the children not to write their names to offer privacy.

Out of the 340, 155 were boys and 185 were girls, 128 were 11 years or older and 212 younger (Age range was from 8 to 15). Table (1) shows mean scores obtained by the children on the Phobia scale and its subscales. Girls obtained significantly higher mean scores than boys in the total score and all subscales except in social phobia.

Table 1: Mean scores obtained by the children on the Phobia scale and its subscales:

	Boys	Girls	P value
Agora/claustrophobia	00.88(1.1)	1.47(1.2)	0.000
Darkness Phobia	2.51(1.9)	3.72(1.9)	0.000
Height Phobia	1.05(0.8)	1.30(0.8)	0.006
Animal Phobia	1.21(1.3)	2.8(1.6)	0.000
Social phobia	0.58(0.7)	0.70(0.6)	0.127
Total	6.23(4.3)	9.97(4.5)	0.000

Data presented as a mean and standard deviation.

Table (2) shows frequency of phobias according to age and sex. In the younger age group (Boys and girls), the most frequent type of phobia was the height (55%) and the least one was agoraphobia and social phobia (27.7% each). The older age boys reported phobia of darkness to be the most frequent (45%), while phobia of height remained the commonest among older girls (37%). All types of phobias decrease with the increasing of age among boys and girls.

Table 2: Frequency of phobias according to age and sex:

	Boys (N=155)		Girls (N=185)	
	Age<11	Age≥11	Age<11	Age≥11
Height Phobia	83(53.5%)	37(23.8%)	102(55.1%)	69(37.2%)
Darkness Phobia	70(45.1%)	39(25.1%)	88(47.5%)	53(28.6%)
Animal Phobia	66(42.5%)	27(17.4%)	94(50.8%)	67(36.2%)
Agora/ claustrophobia	43(27.7%)	25(16.1%)	64(34.5%)	44(23.7%)
Social phobia	43(27.7%)	25(16.1%)	64(34.5%)	44(23.7%)

Data presented as a number and percentage.

Table (3) shows distribution of high phobia according to age and sex. Girls and boys belonging to younger age group (11 years and younger) significantly had a higher level of phobia (i.e. the total score > 9 and had more than on type of phobia), girls more than boys (Nearly the double). Highly phobics decreased (Not necessarily disappear completely) with age among boys and girls.

Table 3: Distribution of high phobia according to age and sex:

	Boys (N=155)	Girls (N=185)
Age<11	27(17.4%)	68(36.7%)
Age≥11	16(10.3%)	37(20%)
Total	43(27.7%)	105(56.7%)**

Data presented as a number and percentage. **P value=0.000

DISCUSSION

This study found that girls more frequently report phobia (Severer level or multiple) than boys and they complain of phobia of height more than animal than darkness, while boys suffer from phobia of darkness followed by height and then animal. Also, phobias tend to decline with age among boys and girls.

The results showed that girls expressed phobias more than boys. This was in agreement with the work of (Essau, et al. 2000). Also, these findings were supported by (Fredrikson, et al. 1996) who mentioned that total point prevalence of any specific phobia was 26.5% for girls and 12.4% for boys. Again, (Lichtenstein and Annas, 2000) found fearfulness to be more among girls than boys (10% vs. 7.3%). (Fredrikson, et al. 1996 and Milne, et al. 1995) reported that girls usually suffer from multiple phobias while boys complain from single ones.

This study found that phobia decreased in the percentage and intensity with age and those specific phobias are transient in nature. An Egyptian study done in 1999 found that younger age group showed

significantly higher percentage of highly phobics. As this study found, boys showed a more rapid loss of most fears leaving teenage girls on average with more phobias than teenage boys. These were approved by many previous studies done by (Milne, et al. 1995, Boyd, et al. 1990 and Gullone, 2000). The general consensus in literature is that phobias decrease with age but according to (Marks, 1987a and Muris, et al. 2000) the incidence of fear witnesses many peaks. They revealed that fears and phobias were common among 4-to 6-year-olds, became even more prominent in 6-to9-year-olds, and then decreased in frequency in 10-to12-year-olds. They mainly concentrated on phobia related to darkness.

In this study, fear of darkness's mean score was significantly higher among girls than boys. It was the commonest phobia among boys and the third commonest among girls in both age groups. This was approved by the work of (Marks, 1987a,b) who reported that fear of darkness is one of the most fears encountered in young age children. Contrary to us, he revealed that phobia of darkness is one of the fears that varies less with age (We found phobia of darkness to decrease to the half with getting older in both sexes).

The present study showed that higher percentage of girls than boys suffered from animal phobia and they significantly had a higher mean score than boys in both age groups. This was consistent with the study of (Fredrikson, et al. 1996) who found that the prevalence of animal phobia is 12.1% in girls and 3.3% in boys. (Essau, et al. 2000) reported that of all specific phobias, animal phobia was the most common. The present study found animal phobia in the third rank order in boys (After darkness and height) and in the second position in girls (After height).

The present work found the mean scores of phobia of height obtained by girls to be significantly higher than those of the boys, also higher percentage of girls expressed fear of heights than the corresponding boy groups. These results were approved by many previous studies which noted that phobia may be evoked not only by looking down but also by looking up. (Marks, 1987; Fredrikson, et al. 1996 and Essau, et al. 2000).

Agora/claustrophobia was found in higher percentage of girls (23% to 34%) than boys (16% to 27%) in the both age groups. Also, girls got significantly higher mean score than boys. This was supported by (Boyd, et al. 1990) who reported that the prevalence rates of agoraphobia are found in the ECA studies to be significantly higher in girls. Contrary to the current results, (Tearnan, et al. 1984) reported that agoraphobia is rare in children.

Social phobia mean scores in our study were insignificantly higher for girls than boys and its percent decreased with age. These findings were consistent with those of (La Greca and Lopez, 1998) who proved that girls reported more social phobia than boys and this was more strongly linked to girls` social functioning than boys. (Essau, et al. 1999) also were with us as more girls than boys received the diagnosis of social phobia but contrary to us as they proved the frequency of the disorder increased with age. The results of a French community study have found a lifetime prevalence rate of social phobia to be 2.1% in boys and 5.4% in girls. Of course, cross-cultural risk factors play role (Lepine and Lellouch, 1995). In the present study, social phobia had the last rank order in both sexes of both age groups. This was in line with the findings of (Boyd, et al. 1990) who reported social phobia to be less prevalent and has no significant sex differences. This might mean that it occurs at a later age or that other aspects of social phobia as public performance are of more concern than just being among a group of people (Moussa, et al. 1999).

In this study, results showed that the percentage of highly phobics significantly decreased with age and this was obvious for girls than boys which is in line with the literature (Black, et al. 1997 and Marks, 1987b). Also, girls in our study as compared to boys significantly got higher mean scores for all objects and situations except for social phobia. This was in agreement with the results of the work of (Fredrikson, et al. 1996 and Moussa, et al. 1999).

It is worth to mention that there is no ready explanation for the fact that specific phobias are more often diagnosed in girls than in boys. Similarly, it is not clear to what extent the nonrandom distribution of phobias can be interpreted in terms of cultural factors (Merckelbach, et al. 1996).

This study has some possible limitations that need to be discussed. Children were the only informants about their phobias. They might underestimate or overestimate their problems or their responses might be less accurate, making it important to compare their responses with other informants (e.g., parents). The inability to contact the family of the phobic child to confirm his answers and know who already received or in need for professional help considered as a limitation in this study.

From these results, one can conclude that in general Saudi girls more frequently report phobia than boys. They suffer from severer level and more than one type of phobia. Also, girls complain of phobia of height more than animal than darkness, while boys suffer from phobia of darkness followed by height and then animal. Phobias tend to decline with age among boys and girls.

The present study highlights one of the sizable mental health problems among Saudi school children. The most important implication of these results is to increase

awareness of the illness because these problems are real and painful to the child and can be severe, so, parents became motivated to seek treatment in order to prevent chronicity. The more we understand the suffering of the children we deal with, the more effective and life-changing our services become. Specific phobias can be recognized and treated with the help of caring families. Longitudinal and family studies would be helpful in elucidating underlying developmental mechanisms involved in expressing phobias by boys and girls.

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الملخص العربى

تأثير النوع والعمر على المخاوف المحددة بين الأطفال السعوديين

عفاف منصور
أستاذ مساعد (كليه طب-جامعة الاسكندرية)

قامت الباحثة بتطبيق إستبيان المخاوف على 340 تلميذاً سعودياً من الذكور والإناث وقد أظهرت النتائج أن البنات كانوا أكثر شكوى من المخاوف عن الأولاد بصفة عامة وخصوصاً بالنسبة للخوف من المرتفعات ثم الحيوانات يليها الخوف من الظلام. أما الأولاد فقد عانوا من الخوف من الظلام أكثر من خوفهم من المرتفعات أكثر من الحيوانات. هذه المخاوف تميل إلى التناقص مع التقدم فى العمر. وتمت مناقشة النتائج ومقارنتها مع الدراسات الأخرى السابقة مع توضيح كيفية الإستفادة من هذه الدراسة عملياً مع ذكرالتوصيات.