

Measuring childhood stress: a review

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Abstract

Over the years there has been an increasing interest in childhood stress, more specifically psychosocial stress, and its effects on children's physical and psychological well-being. The high prevalence of childhood stress and psychosomatic complaints in children are a subject of concern since children are most vulnerable to the adverse health consequences of chronic stress exposure. Childhood stressors can originate from multiple events in their everyday surroundings and comprise both major life events, as well as minor day-to-day difficulties and hassles. A large diversity of stress assessment methods are available. This review article summarizes the most commonly methods for psychosocial stress assessment in elementary school children (6 to 12 years old) and addresses a broad public (including scientists not specialised in the field of stress research).

The first part of the article briefly describes the stress response to acute and chronic stressors. The second section of the review is devoted to childhood stress assessment methods. Both child specific paper-and-pencil checklists and face-to-face interviews, as well as more objective laboratory measurements of cortisol in biological samples (serum, urine, saliva and hair) are addressed. Hair cortisol measurements are introduced as a new, potential biological marker for paediatric stress research. Since literature repeatedly requested more standardisation in the field of childhood stress measurement, the importance of standardisation in this field is underlined. In addition, a number of reflections and considerations are described that will help in the selection of a suitable method for the reader.

Each method is characterized by own benefits and limitations. Childhood stress research should therefore firstly attempt to implement a combination of subjective checklists/interviews and objective stress hormone measures and secondly try to fulfil standardized strategies.

(The authors are currently writing the review article.)

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