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NEW ZEALAND CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES  
OF  
STRESS AND COPING

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## ABSTRACT

Children's experiences of stress and coping have been underexplored in comparison to studies with adults and adolescents. Of those studies that have been conducted on children, many have utilised checklists originally developed by and for adults or adolescents or developed for children without consulting with them. It is only relatively recently that children have begun to be consulted about issues that concern them. While there have been studies exploring specific aspects of children's lives, there is no evidence of a study that has asked children, living around a country, not in known stressful situations, to talk about their stress and coping. There has been no prior research of this nature undertaken in New Zealand.

This study explores New Zealand/Aotearoa<sup>1</sup> children's experiences of stress and coping in their lives. A total number of 171 children, aged 8 to 12, from 29 schools throughout the country, were invited to take part in the study. There were two phases of data collection and the second phase included the administration of a coping checklist which was developed out of the data from Phase One. Overall 62 participants engaged in an individual interview and the rest took part in focus groups of primarily four children each. Discussion was facilitated using informal guidelines and all the individual interviews and focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology.

Four categories of stress and 29 stressors were identified, the majority of which cluster around children's two primary contexts, the school and family. The results demonstrate that many of the challenges children identify are linked to the stress experienced by the significant adults in their lives including their teachers but primarily, their parents. While they could identify what their parents and other significant adults in their lives find stressful, they were unsure, and in some cases doubtful, that adults were

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<sup>1</sup> *Aotearoa* – Maori word for 'New Zealand'

aware of what children find stressful or if they could identify the signs that a child was experiencing stress. The 20 coping strategies that were identified were ordered into four categories of coping with the primary modality being internal behavioural or cognitive strategies.

Children have explicit and articulate views on what they experience as stressful; how they are vicariously affected by global stressors and what they perceive the significant adults in their lives experience as stressful. Most children have a broad range of coping strategies that they can utilise and most identified their mother as part of their support system. There are challenges however, when stressors are experienced in the family and children have to rely heavily on their internal coping strategies. The small number of children, who could not identify a close family member or a member of the school personnel as support, were noticeable in their vulnerability.

The participants provide valuable insight into the world of childhood and inform us as to what is needed to ensure as strong a mental health foundation as possible so that they emerge into adolescence and adulthood able to participate as fully and effectively as possible.

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The four pages of art are copies of paintings by 9 and 10-year old students from a local primary school. They were asked to paint what they thought stress looked like.