

## **Child and Family Influences on Adjustment to School:**

### **Differences between kindergarten, primary and secondary student groups**

**Rosalind Murray-Harvey & Phillip Slee**

School of Education

Flinders University

GPO Box 2100

Adelaide SA 5001

E-mail: [roz.murray-harvey@flinders.edu.au](mailto:roz.murray-harvey@flinders.edu.au)

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## Abstract

The focus of this study was children's adjustment to school. Three hundred and eighteen families provided information on a range of family variables that were hypothesised to impact on their kindergarten, primary school, or secondary school aged child's adjustment to school as rated by the child's teacher. With additional data obtained from the primary and secondary students, three path models were developed (based on kindergarten, primary and secondary data) to examine the interrelationship between child and family factors and the strength of their effect on adjustment to school. The results of model testing using path analysis revealed a mix of child and family factors exerting an effect on adjustment for the kindergarten group with gender and family stress directly influencing children's adjustment to school. Family factors related to financial and occupational status, parents' age, and family cohesion impacted directly on secondary students' adjustment to school. For the primary school group, a different picture emerged depicting the influence of child (gender, temperament and stress) rather than family variables on adjustment to school. It seems that through the school years, a different range of factors operate within the context of the family to affect children's adjustment to school.

## Background

Unravelling relationships between and among the multitude of variables that may have an effect on a child's adjustment to school is a complex task.

Part of the complexity arises from the difficulty in establishing direct causal links between adjustment and any specific set of variables. These range from individual differences or personal attributes such as temperament, age or sex; family background characteristics such as occupation, education level or marital status; to contextual factors such as family environment, stressful life events, social support networks, marital harmony and coping resources. This suggests the need to study the interplay of factors that in combination make it more likely that any individual child may be regarded as 'at risk' of being poorly adjusted.

In the design and analysis of this research consideration was given to points raised in other studies on the need for multiple perspectives (Work, et al, 1990), the need for research that takes into account the effects of stress across the life-span (Sim & Vuchinich, 1996), and the need to take into account the complexity of the interaction between life events and the behavioural/emotional functioning of children (Berden et. al., 1990: 957). Additionally, a feature of the present study has concentrated on 'typical', non-clinical families whereas existing research in the field generally has focussed on high risk samples.

The central concern of this paper will be with the results of testing path models which were developed for each of three separate age groups (kindergarten, primary school and secondary school) for the influences of family and child factors on children's adjustment to school. Because of the varying influences that may impact on the lives of parents and children at different stages in the family life cycle, the models understandably

included a different range of variables. Nevertheless, each model was developed and tested around a common set of aims: first, to examine the relationship between background factors and school adjustment; and secondly, to identify links between child and family stress and school adjustment. As part of this second aim, the mediating effect of family stress on children's adjustment to school was of particular interest.

## Method

### Sample

Three hundred and eighteen families were randomly selected from students' names in 27 participating schools' roll books. Every fourth family on the roll book was approached. Schools were spread across inner and outer metropolitan Adelaide and included both government and non-government sectors. In all, 297 female and 21 male adults participated. The mean age of the adult sample was 37.4 years (range 21-52 years) and 79 per cent were in a marital relationship. The mean number of years in the marital relationship was 12.4 years and the mean number of children in the family was 2.6. The family profile indicated normal distributions for the sample across residence, education level, income and occupation. Seven per cent of families spoke a language other than English at home. The student profile was 165 female and 153 males with a mean age of 8.94 (range 4-17 years). In relation to teachers' perceptions of children's adjustment to school 70.7 per cent of children were rated as adjusted/very well adjusted while 5.3% were rated as poorly/very poorly adjusted.

## Procedure

An experienced interviewer conducted an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes with one parent who completed a range of questionnaires. The interview data yielded demographic information along with details regarding stressful life events and psychological well-being for both adults and children. The teachers of the children completed a range of questions relating to the children's adjustment to school. Children above year two were interviewed regarding stressful life events, attitude to school and coping with stress. Instruments selected for the study are listed in the Appendix.

## The Path Models

The first model with 16 latent variables examined the influence of the explanatory background variables on children's adjustment to kindergarten based on data from 111 families of pre-schoolers. The factors selected for study were based on extensive review of the literature. The child factors predicted to influence adjustment were the child's sex, temperament and coping with stress. Family variables included SES indicators, parent age, parent relationship factors (e.g. marital status, satisfaction with the relationship), years married, family milieu, social support and family stress. Personal factors included locus of control and health status. Teachers rated the children's adjustment to kindergarten.

The second model with 17 constructs (or latent variables) was tested for the effects of family and child factors on the child's adjustment to primary school as rated by their teachers. This model was based on data

from 115 families. Three additional child variables were included in this model - child's age, and the children's own reports on stressful life events and their attitude to school. Parent age was not included in this model.

The third and fourth models focus on secondary school students' adjustment to school. With only 92 families interviewed, the number of variables able to be included in each model was restricted so two models were developed. The first, referred to as the 'Child Factors' model focused on student variables related to sex and age of the student, and students' own ratings of stressful life events, coping with problems, and attitude to school. The 'Family Factors' model emphasised parent-related factors.

### Path Analysis

The path models were tested using a latent variables partial least squares path analysis (PLSPATH ) procedure (Sellin & Keeves, 1996). The initial design of the model is fully recursive wherein each variable was positioned as it was predicted to influence the succeeding variables in the model.

Along with sex of the child, family factors were hypothesised to influence child factors. Family Stress was depicted as a mediating variable by its placement between the antecedent family variables and the child variables. The criterion variable was Adjustment to School.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the outer model was refined by successively deleting the manifest (direct measures) variables that did not contribute to explaining the latent variable (construct). All measures

that had a loading (in the same sense as a principal components analysis) of at least twice their standard error were retained. Once the outer model was stable, the inner model was refined. Again, all paths were deleted where the path coefficient (similar to regression analysis) was less than twice its standard error.

The final models presented in the accompanying tables show the variables that exerted an effect on both the outcome variable and the other latent variables in the model. Direct, indirect and total effects are reported along with correlations.

## Results

### Adjustment to Kindergarten

From all the factors included in this model, two variables emerged as predictors of kindergarteners' poor adjustment: Sex of the child (male) and Family Stress both exerting a direct effect. No indirect effects were found. In the main, pre-school teachers considered poor adjustment to be indicative of less developed social skills such as being liked by and cooperating with other children, and relating to the teacher.

Difficulty with concentrating and following instructions were also features of poor adjustment. The results show that the variables included in this model explain 17 per cent of the variance on Adjustment. What may account for some of the unexplained variance? There is some evidence emerging in the literature that parenting practices, such as discipline style will influence young children's adjustment but data on these were not

obtained.

### Adjustment to Primary School

The main difference between this model and the pre-school model is the additional information we were able to obtain from children on their Attitude to School and their assessment of Life Events. A global measure of Adjustment was used in this model represented by the teacher's rating along a 5-point scale. The single measure was considered adequate in light of the high association between overall adjustment and each of the Hightower et al. (1996) classroom adjustment rating scales measuring a range of child problem behaviours and competencies. The scales that were most strongly related to poor adjustment were task orientation/educational performance and learning problems. Other influences on teachers' ratings were low frustration/tolerance levels, and poor peer and assertive social skills, Finally, both acting out and withdrawal problem behaviour were considered by teachers in their rating of the students' adjustment to school. There was a shift in emphasis on what constituted poor adjustment in the kindergarten and in the primary years from a stronger emphasis on social competencies in the younger years to a focus on educational performance of primary school students.

The combined effect of variables in the model explained 27 per cent of the variance on poor adjustment to school. The three variables that exerted a direct effect on primary students' poor adjustment were all child factors.

In order of their effect (indicated by the strength of the path coefficient) they were: temperament of the child (rated by parent)

indicating a more difficult temperament; child's sex- represented by males; and, stressful life events (rated by the child) indicating a relationship between more SLEs and poor adjustment.

In this model there were two indirect family-related influences - a higher external locus of control operating through temperament, and family stress operating through child stress. So, this model, like the kindergarten model shows a relationship between stress in the family and adjustment to school.

#### Adjustment to Secondary School

As mentioned earlier, data for 92 cases restricted the number of variables that could be included in a single model. So, two models were developed.

#### Child Factors Model

Notable from the path results were the influences of Child Sex represented as male, child's rating of SLEs, and child's poor problem solving and coping skills on their attitude to school. However, attitude to school did not influence teachers' ratings of the secondary student as poorly adjusted. Finance, representing difficulties, was the one factor that influenced adjustment to school in this model. The variables in this model explained 8 per cent of the variance on School Adjustment.

This low level of explained variance is probably a consequence of the methodology. Only one teacher's rating was requested which, on reflection, is likely to have made the outcome measure less reliable than the teacher ratings in the other two models. In secondary school it may be important to

get a number of teachers' ratings because students do not have only one class teacher as in primary school. We need to look more closely also at what teachers perceive to be attributes of poor adjustment. We had this information from kindergarten and primary teachers but obtained only a global measure of adjustment from the secondary students' homegroup teacher.

### Family Factors Model

Two factors emerged as having a direct impact on secondary students' adjustment. The family environment construct indicated that, in the main, less family cohesion predicted poor adjustment to school. The other effect on poor adjustment in this model was Status indicating that lower levels of education and occupational status were related to poor adjustment to school. In all, variables in this model accounted for 14 per cent of the variance on the outcome of poor Adjustment to School.

The effects of variables in the secondary school model on students' adjustment to school and the fact that the family stress construct did not have an effect on adjustment suggests there are factors other than those included in the model that have an impact on school adjustment.

Although there was no relationship between the student's attitude to school and the teacher's rating of adjustment, it was interesting to note three direct and two indirect influences which accounted for 29 per cent of the variance on Attitude. Predictors of poor Attitude were Sex (male), higher number of life events (more stressors), and poor problem solving and coping

strategies - this being the most highly predictive factor. Indirect predictors were family stress, and parent's rating of the child's stress coping.

## Discussion

The findings from the present study have highlighted the complexity of the interplay between child and family factors and children's school adjustment. Overall, the findings point to the value of a life-cycle perspective in considering this broad issue. With regard to individual child factors related to school adjustment a number of the present findings warrant discussion. The tendency for teachers to focus on externalising behaviours as indicators of poor adjustment as suggested by Goodman et al (1993) was not borne out in this study. Goodman anticipated that teachers may classify males as more poorly adjusted than females because, under stress, boys are more likely to exhibit acting out behaviours such as aggression whereas withdrawn behaviours which are more typical of girls and therefore not disruptive in the classroom, may be misclassified as well-adjusted. However, in the present study, there was as high a correlation between withdrawn behaviour and poor adjustment as there was between aggressive behaviour and adjustment problems.

The results for both kindergarten and primary school analyses indicated a direct effect of gender (male) on poor adjustment to school and in the secondary school analysis of gender (male) on negative attitude to school. None of the models showed gender to be mediated by stress. So, while this

study confirms previous research where boys have been found to be more poorly adjusted to school than girls (Goodman, et al., 1993), stressful life events were not found to be a mediating factor.

In relation to age, early adolescence has been regarded as a period of increased vulnerability to maladjustment in the face of stress (Compas, 1987). However, age was not found to have a direct effect on school adjustment in either the primary or the secondary models in this study.

For primary school aged children the model depicts a link between older age and family stress but not between age and child stress and further, no indirect effect was found that would show family stress acted as a mediating variable between age and child stress.

While age of the child per se, was not predictive of poor adjustment some interesting relationships were detected between and stress and adjustment for the different age groupings. The present study confirms the finding of earlier research (Slee, 1993) linking a cumulative stressful life events effect with adjustment problems. The evidence here points to a direct effect of higher levels of stress in families on problems at school; in the case of kindergarten and primary school children on adjustment rated by teachers, and in the case of secondary students on their attitude to school. Of interest also was the finding of increasing numbers of life events reported by parents with increasing age of the child (kindergarten  $X = 4.82$ ; primary  $X = 6.55$ ; secondary  $X = 6.75$ ). This upward trend was consistent with the children's own reports that showed a higher number of life events occurring in the secondary school age group,  $X = 10.35$ ,

compared to the primary school age group,  $X = 7.78$ . Similar developmental differences have been reported elsewhere (Berden, et al., 1990). The present cross-sectional study also highlights the danger of generalising the link between family stress and adjustment from any one age group to another. The interplay of factors that appear to be predictive of family stress vary at different points in the family life cycle.

The degree of concordance between adult and child ratings of life events is a significant finding of the present study. The use of adult assessments of the stressfulness of life events for their child has been regarded previously as a limitation in interpreting the effects of stressful life events on child adjustment (Work, et al, 1990). The two models which included constructs representing measures of both child and adult life events revealed a strong, direct relationship between adult and child rating on the frequency of life events in the child's lifetime.

Examination of item responses comparing adult and child ratings which preceded the path analysis indicated strong agreement between adult and child on rating of both the occurrence and the stressfulness of the life event for the child.

This result suggests that on the whole parents were able to accurately assess the stressfulness of life events in the family for their child.

The secondary model also reveals the predictive value of parents' assessments of their child's ability to cope with stress on the adolescent's own coping strategies. Children who were regarded by their parents as less able to cope in the face of family stress independently

reported fewer problem solving and stress coping strategies.

## Conclusion

Two aspects of this research have attempted to address perceived shortcomings of research-to-date related to the need to improve the reliability of results by (1) obtaining multiple perspectives and (2) by broadening the age range of children included in the study because much research has extrapolated findings for children-in-general from a selected age group. In this study, information was sought from children as well as parents to enable a comparison of perceptions of stress in families from two perspectives; and, interviews were conducted with families of children spread across all the years of schooling - from 4 to 17 years of age.

An obvious feature of the influence of family variables on child adjustment to school is the complexity of the relationships between variables. This suggests that factors hypothesised to influence adjustment to school should not be examined in isolation. Rather, to gain an understanding of how these variables operate in relationship to each other as mediating influences, as well as directly on Adjustment, it was important to analyse data in ways that were sensitive to this complexity and the path analysis procedures employed in this research permitted this. Future research will need to focus on improving the reliability of teacher ratings and more closely examining the family stress construct.

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Note: Graphic presentation of models and tables describing the variables

included in the analyses are available from the authors. Address correspondence to Dr Rosalind Murray-Harvey, School of Education, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001.

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## Appendix

### Instruments:

The Life Events Survey (Slee, 1993) contains 23 items presented as  
statements. Respondents answer yes/no to whether each event (statement)  
has  
occurred in their child's life, and indicate on a 3-point scale the  
relative degree of stress experienced for each event: 1= no stress 2=  
some  
stress 3= high stress.

The Life Events Survey: Child Version (Slee, 1995) contains 25 items  
presented as statements. Respondents answer yes/no to whether each  
event  
(statement) has occurred to them and indicate on a 3-point scale the  
relative degree of stress experienced for each event: 1= no stress 2=  
some  
stress 3= high stress. Students at Year 3 and above complete the child  
version of the Life Events Survey. Seven additional items were included  
in  
the survey for adolescents.

The Social Support Scale (Slee, 1993) provides information on the type,

nature and frequency of support requested and received by respondents over a 2-week period, and the extent of the respondents' social support network.

The Locus of Control of Behaviour Scale (Craig, Franklin & Andrews, 1984)

contains 17 items to which respondents indicate the perceived source of control of behaviour along a 6-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) (Goldberg & Williams, 1991)

The

28 item version assessing four factors: (1) somatic symptoms, (2)

anxiety

and insomnia, (3) social dysfunction, and (4) severe depression.

The Child Temperament Survey (DOTS): (Lerner, Palermo, & Nesselroade, 1982)

The DOTS assesses 11 dimensions of temperament from a 54 item questionnaire.

The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale: (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). The FACES is a 20-item instrument designed to measure two main dimensions of family functioning: cohesion and adaptability based on the Circumplex Model of family functioning.

Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS) (Hightower, 1987). The T-CRS is a 38 item questionnaire with 7 subscales designed to assess learning and behavioural adjustment to school.

The Child Rating Scale (CRS) (Hightower, 1987). The CRS is a 6-factor

questionnaire assessing learning and behavioural adjustment to school. Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). 18 items to which adolescents respond on a 5 point scale whether they don't use=1 to use a lot=5, a range of strategies for coping with concerns including study, family, friends, the world. Subscales are Reference to Others, Problem Solving, and Non-coping.

Table 1  
 Latent Variables Direct, Total and Indirect Effects and Correlations in the Adjustment to Pre-School Model

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=====
Variable Direct Total Indirect Correlation
-----

EDUCATION LEVEL R2 = .067

LOCUS -.2596 -.2596 - -.2596
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OCCUPATIONAL STATUS R2 = .169
  
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LOCUS .2157 .2931 .0774 .2931

EDUC -.2982 -.2982 -.3542

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FINANCIAL RESOURCES R2= .475

LOCUS - -.2216 -.2216 -.1803

EDUC .1539 .3387 .1848 .3734

OCCUP -.6198 -.6198 - -.6743

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MARITAL STATUS R2= .303

EDUC - .1240 .1240 .0995

OCCUP .4235 -.0345 -.4580 -.0748

FINANCE .7390 .7390 - .4534

---

YEARS MARRIED R2= .251

PARAGE .3476 .3476 - .4170

FINANCE - .2100 .2100 .3773

MARSTAT .2856 .2856 - .3700

---

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT R2= .045

LOCUS -.2118 -.2118 - -.2118

---

MARITAL ADJUSTMENT R2= .321

OCCUP - .1208 .1208 .0480

FINANCE -.1949 -.1949 - -.1340

FAMENV .4550 .4500 - .4255

SUPPORT .3193 .3193 - .3187

---

HEALTH R2= .400

PARAGE .1855 .1855 - .0928

LOCUS .4879 .5265 .0386 .5320

OCCUP - .1078 .1078 .1075

FINANCE -.1740 -.1740 - -.2178

SUPPORT -.2601 -.2601 - .3444

---

FAMILY STRESS R2= .346

PARAGE -.2332 -.1919 .0414 -.3126

LOCUS - .1337 .1337 .1512

FINANCE - -.3432 -.3432 -.4091

MARSTAT -.4120 -.4120 - -.5117

HEALTH .2229 .2229 - .2808

---

TEMPERAMENT R2= .296

LOCUS -.4854 -.4940 -.0086 -.4991

FINANCE - .1604 .1604 .2279

MARSTAT .2171 .2171 - .2478

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CHILD COPING R2= .323

LOCUS - .2670 .2670 .3236

OCCUP .2749 .0823 -.1926 .1879

FINANCE .3170 .2336 -.0833 .0132

MARSTAT - -.1128 -.1128 -.0853

TEMPMENT -.5195 -.5195 - -.5143

---

ADJUSTMENT TO PRESCHOOL R2= .168

CHILD SEX -.3806 -.3086 - -.3686

FAM STRESS

.1786 .1786 - .1529

=====

Note: Path effects <0.10 not reported

Table 2

Latent Variables Direct, Total and Indirect Effects and Correlations in  
 the  
 Adjustment to Primary School Model

=====

Variable Direct Total Indirect Correlation

-----

LOCUS OF CONTROL R2 = .071

CHSEX -.2664 -.2664 - -.2664

-----

STATUS (EDUCATION & OCCUPATION) R2= .062

LOCUS .2493 .2493 - .2493

-----

FINANCIAL RESOURCES R2= .110

STATUS -.3313 -.3313 - -.3313

-----

MARITAL STATUS R2= .076

FINANCE .2757 .2757 - .2757

---

YEARS MARRIED R2= .265

CHAGE .1858 .1858 - .1719

FINANCE - .1338 .1338 .2071

MARSTAT .4852 .4852 - .4798

---

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT R2= .152

LOCUS -.2385 -.2450 -.0065 -.2655

MARSTAT .2873 .2873 - .3097

---

SOCIAL SUPPORT R2= .154

LOCUS -.2314 -.2956 -.0642 -.3010

FAMENV .2619 .2619 - .3233

---

MARITAL ADJUSTMENT R2= .096

FAMENV .3093 .3093 - .3093

---

HEALTH R2= .268

LOCUS .2907 .2970 .0063 .3387

FINANCE .2131 .2054 -.0077 .2495

FAMENV - -.0975 -.0975 -.1567

MARADJ -.3152 -.3152 - -.3684

---

FAMILY STRESS R2= .496

CHAGE .2335 .2335 - .2603

LOCUS - .1456 .1456 .2157

STATUS .3415 .2411 -.1004 .3061

FINANCE .3462 .3031 -.0430 .2457

MARSTAT -.3589 -.3666 -.0076 -.3777

HEALTH .2723 .2723 - .4047

---

TEMPERAMENT R2= .208

LOCUS -.3141 -.3533 -.0392 -.3722

MARSTAT - .0987 .0987 .2336

FAMSTRES -.2692 -.2692 - -.3369

---

CHILD STRESS COPING R2= .311

LOCUS - .1971 .1971 .2408

FAMSTRES - .1501 .1501 .2925

TEMPMENT -.5577 -.5577 - -.5577

---

CHILD STRESS R2= .171

MARSTAT - -.2163 -.2163 -.2927

YEARSMAR -.2191 -.2191 - -.2943

FAMSTRES .3001 .3001 - .3550

---

ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL R2= .151

CHAGE .3275 .3275 - .3335

MARADJ -.1999 -.1999 - -.2096

---

ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL R2= .269

CHSEX -.2249 -.2609 -.0361 -.2672

LOCUS - .1354 .1354 .1478

FAMSTRES - .1695 .1695 .2473

TEMPMENT -.3506 -.3506 - -.3982

CHSTRESS .2504 .2504 - .2776

=====

Note: Path effects <0.10 not reported

Table 3

Latent Variables Direct, Total and Indirect Effects and Correlations

for

Secondary School Child Factors Adjustment Model

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Variable Direct Total Indirect Correl'n

-----

CHILD AGE R2= .052

CHSEX .2282 .2282 - .2282

-----

FAMILY STRESS R2= .147

FINANCE .3829 .3829 - .3829

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IMPACT OF LIFE EVENTS R2= .091

FINANCE - .1157 .1157 .0331

SLERATE .3022 .3022 - .3022

---

CHILD COPE R2= .082

IMPACT .2864 .2864 - .2864

---

CHILD STRESS R2= .098

FINANCE - .1201 .1201 .1360

SLERATE .3136 .3136 - .3136

---

COPING R2= .220

SLERATE - -.1212 -.1212 -.2962

CHCOPE -.3084 -.3084 - -.3636

CHSTRESS -.3015 -.3015 - -.3580

---

ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL R2= .287

CHSEX -.1975 -.1975 - -.1651

SLERATE - .1275 .1275 .0912

CHCOPE - .1061 .1061 .1492

CHSTRESS .2735 .3772 .1037 .4011

COPING -.3440 -.3440 - -.4197

-----

ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL R2= .076

FINANCE .2758 .2758 - .2758

=====

Note: Effects < 0.10 not reported

#### Table 4

Latent Variables Direct, Total and Indirect Effects and Correlations

for

Secondary School Family Factors Adjustment Model

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Variable Direct Total Indirect Correl'n

-----

FINANCE R2= .144

STATUS .3795 .3795 - .3795

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FAMILY ENVIRONMENT R2= .054

FINANCE -.2328 -.2328 - -.2328

---

SOCIAL SUPPORT R2= .205

STATUS - -.1519 -.1519 -.1965

FINANCE -.3493 -.4001 -.0508 -.4001

FAMENV .2182 .2182 - .2995

---

MARITAL ADJUSTMENT R2= .260

STATUS - -.1000 -.1000 -.1181

FINANCE -.1590 -.2635 -.1045 -.2635

FAMENV .4490 .4490 - .4860

---

FAMILY STRESS R2= .195

PARAGE -.2447 -.2447 - -.2439

STATUS - .1396 .1396 .1196

FINANCE .3678 .3678 - .3673

---

IMPACT OF LIFE EVENTS R2= .096

FINANCE - .1142 .1142 .0369

SLERATE .3104 .3104 - .3104

---

CHILD COPING R2= .082

IMPACT .2867 .2867 - .2867

-----  
ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL R2= .143

STATUS .2350 .2594 .0244 .2602

FAMENV -.2761 -.2761 - -.2976

=====  
Note: Effects < 0.10 not reported