

AN ANALYSIS OF STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS DURING ADOLESCENCE

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The goal of this study was to examine stressful life events –in a quantitative and a qualitative manner– using a large adolescent sample. Additionally, we explored possible differences between girls and boys in how they deal with psychosocial stress. Firstly, results showed that school and family contexts were the main causes of stressful events in adolescence. Secondly, data analysis revealed a similar pattern in how girls and boys manage psychosocial stress during adolescence, but there were also significant differences in particular events, in relation to both their frequency and their emotional impact.

Keywords: Adolescence, stressful life events, psychosocial stress, gender differences.

El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar cuantitativa y cualitativamente el estrés psicosocial experimentado por una amplia muestra de adolescentes y explorar posibles diferencias en esta dimensión entre chicos y chicas. Los resultados obtenidos pusieron de manifiesto, en primer lugar, la relevancia de determinados eventos vitales estresantes durante la adolescencia, particularmente los relacionados con el ámbito escolar y familiar. En segundo lugar, se observó tanto la existencia de un patrón compartido en el modo en que chicos y chicas experimentan estrés psicosocial durante la adolescencia, como algunas diferencias significativas entre unos y otras, en cuanto al tipo de situaciones más frecuentes y el impacto emocional con que se viven.

Palabras clave: adolescencia, acontecimientos vitales estresantes, estrés psicosocial, diferencias en función del sexo.

Today, the particular sensitivity that characterizes adolescence in relation to coping with some of its difficulties is broadly recognised. The traditional view of this developmental stage, in terms of torment and drama, has been discredited; moreover, doubts have been raised over the optimistic perspective endorsed in later years, a view that defined adolescence as a stable and trouble-free period. A focus on the transitional nature of this stage, as well as on the numerous and intense changes it involves and the new roles the adolescent must fulfil, has contributed to consolidating a view of adolescence as an especially vulnerable time for experiencing developmental difficulties related to at least three areas: conflict with parents, emotional instability and risk behaviours (Oliva, 2003).

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The prevalence of stressful life events during adolescence and its relation to emotional impact

During adolescence, both the circumstances that promote and hinder development –that is, risk and protective factors– can change with respect to previous stages, requiring a specific analysis with a view to their repercussions on adolescents' adjustment and development (Dekovic, 1999). On analyzing the risk factors during this stage, developmental psychology has concerned itself with exploring, among other circumstances, the psychosocial stress experienced by boys and girls of this age, as it is considered a potential risk factor for well-being and personal development.

Numerous definitions have been proposed for conceptualizing psychosocial stress, but criticism has been levelled at their divergent nature, their excessive breadth or their lack of testing in the research context. Currently, the most widely accepted definitions focus on the environmental circumstances or conditions that threaten, challenge, overload or harm the psychological or biological capacities of the individual, in this case the adolescent (Compas, 2004). From this conceptualization, various elements have been considered that may be present in the life of adolescents. Thus, Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon

and Halpert (2003) include acute traumatic events (such as natural or human disasters, sexual or physical abuse, or exposure to neighbourhood violence), chronic stress and adversity (such as financial poverty or difficulty, personal or parental chronic illness, or chronic abuse or neglect), and the accumulation of stressful life events and difficulties in everyday life. The latter includes both normative developmental experiences (life events such as the transition to secondary education or “first dates”) and non-normative events (such as parents’ divorce or imprisonment of a family member).

Summarizing up, the stressful conditions boys and girls must cope with in adolescence are both numerous and varied. In this work, we shall concentrate on a particular aspect within the field of psychosocial stress: stressful life events. Goodyer (2001, cit. in Canalda & Carbonés, 2005) defines them as any fact or circumstance that occurs in people’s lives, with an identifiable beginning and end, that potentially can alter one’s current mental state or physical well-being. Thus, these events are like other life circumstances insofar as they involve a discrepancy between contextual demands and the resources available to meet them. However, they differ from permanent or chronic conditions by virtue of their temporal nature (Casullo, 1998).

The most recent reviews on the adolescent period, concerned with the study of stressful events during adolescence, have looked at how these boys and girls experience such events, employing mainly self-reported measures. In general terms, the available data on this question point out to a fairly generalized increase in the frequency of stressful events during early and middle adolescence (Graber, 2004; Goossens, 2006).

In line with this growing interest, in Spain, Oliva and cols. assessed such risk circumstances in a sample of 101 adolescents from the province of Seville (Spain) in early, middle and late adolescence (Oliva, Jiménez & Parra, 2009; Oliva, Jiménez, Parra & Sánchez-Queija, 2008), finding that these adolescents had faced, on average, over six stressful events in the previous four years.

A quantitative analysis of the experience of stressful events such as those mentioned above is common in the literature on this topic. In our view, this may be due to the fact that, within the variety of stressors to which adolescents are exposed, stressful life events are currently considered to be one of the most significant risk factors for adjustment during this stage of development.

From this perspective, it has been emphasized

specifically that the accumulation of stressful factors in people’s lives represents a greater threat to adjustment than a single isolated element, regardless of the kind of risk circumstance involved (Rutter, Tizard & Whitmore, 1970; cit. in Atzaba-Poria, Pike & Deater-Deckard, 2004). Thus, the thesis of the accumulation of risk factors has set out to confirm how an increase in the experience of difficulties is associated with greater negative impacts as a result of such events.

A qualitative approach to stressful life events during adolescence

Beyond a quantitative and accumulative consideration of this kind of event, transactional models have been concerned with the advantages of a qualitative approach to the study of stressful life events (Grant et al., 2003), emphasizing that any event can become a stressor at some point, depending slightly, or not only, on the type of circumstance involved, but also on how the person responds to or copes with that circumstance. Thus, the potential for an event to impact on a person’s life will be related, among other things, to how he/she appraises that event, the individual characteristics determining the degree of vulnerability, the coping strategies available and the person’s contextual situation (Candalda & Carbonés, 2005).

However, as we have pointed out, traditionally the majority of studies that have analyzed stressful life events –particularly in childhood and adolescence– have focused on the assessment of objective aspects, such as exposure to environmental events. The reason why this perspective has been the most widely accepted in the scientific community is probably that a definition of stress based on cognitive processes is problematic in research, especially given the difficulties of self-reporting about the emotional impact of events experienced in the first years of life.

The results of studies on stress carried out in childhood support the validity of a quantitative approach to this construct (Grant et al., 2003; Compas, 2004). Nevertheless, although the effects of a stressful event can be felt regardless of the existence of assessment processes, these cognitive processes begin to play an especially significant role in development during adolescence, so they should be taken into account. From our point of view, such appreciations are particularly appropriated in the applied field, given the richness of qualitative analysis for guiding effective preventive interventions in the area of psychosocial stress as it affects adolescents.

In line with such considerations, it is important to apply qualitative approaches to the study of stressful events during adolescence, analyzing their presence and number but also the kind of circumstance involved and, above all, the way it is experienced by the adolescent. The results available up to now reveal that the most important or serious stressors in this stage tend to be non-normative events –i.e., events not experienced by the majority of those in this age range. Among the non-normative events which, according to a review of the literature, are particularly stressful, are the death of a parent, parents' divorce, imprisonment of a family member, one's own or one's partner's pregnancy, and parents' unemployment. The most frequently cited events of a normative nature –that is, the everyday concerns, difficulties and tensions that form part of the life of most adolescents– are those related to the family and peer-group context: change of school, conflict between parents and children, and problems in peer relationships (Graber, 2004; Musitu, Buelga, Lila & Cava, 2004).

In our most immediate context, the cited study by Oliva et al. (2008) followed a qualitative approach to assess the reality of adolescents in Seville in relation to stressful events. The stressful life events most frequently encountered in this study were change of school class, death of a close relative and break-up with one's partner. As for the emotional impact of such events, death of a family member, quarrels and breaking up with one's best friend, family illness, partner's unfaithfulness and sexual harassment or abuse were among the most important.

These authors found that in some cases there was a combination of high frequency and high emotional impact; this was the case with death of a family member, breaking up with one's partner, quarrels or conflict with one's parents and breaking up with one's best friend. However, there were other events experienced by few adolescents but which, when they occurred, had a very strong impact, such as being the victim of sexual harassment or abuse and a close family member having severe mental handicap or illness.

The experience of stressful events during adolescence according to sex

Some authors have also concentrated on assessing the potential differences between boys and girls in the experience of stressful events during adolescence. In general, such differences have not been confirmed in relation to the accumulation of stressors (e.g., Oliva et

al., 2008) or the emotional impact of such experiences (e.g., Kim, Conger, Elder & Lorenz, 2003). However, despite the existence of quantitative approaches to the differential experience of stressful events between adolescent boys and girls, there is still a lack of research aimed at identifying differences by sex from a qualitative perspective of psychosocial stress. Therefore, it may be that a qualitative analysis of the differential experience of stressful events between boys and girls would reveal the existence of divergent patterns for specific contexts of development.

Objectives

Within the framework of a Collaboration Agreement between the University of Seville and the Seville City Council, our research team has been developing research to explore the most relevant dimensions and processes for the functioning of the family as a developmental context. As part of this research we have studied, among other aspects, the adjustment of boys and girls during adolescence. In this article we shall present an analysis of the stressful events experienced by a broader sample of adolescents from the city of Seville than those studied up to now. The specific objectives of this article are:

- a) First, to describe the prevalence of stressful life events during adolescence and its relation to emotional impact.
- b) Second, to explore the most common and impactful stressful events that occur in adolescence.
- c) Finally, to examine possible differences in the experience of stressful events between girls and boys during adolescence.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 623 boys and girls aged between 11 and 17 ($M = 13.12$, $SD = 1.47$), from the final year of primary education up to the first year of the *Bachillerato* course. There was roughly equal distribution by sex (50.2% boys), and the majority of these boys and girls (80% of the total sample) followed the normal curriculum, with only a small percentage requiring special educational measures, such as extra educational attention (10%) and school support (10%).

Instruments

Oliva et al. (2008) designed the *Inventario de Acontecimientos Vitales Estresantes* (Inventory of

Stressful Life Events), which includes a list of 29 negative or potentially problematic events covering the types of stressful experience that can occur during adolescence in personal, family, school and peer-related contexts. This instrument yields two types of scores, which were both used in the present study: one clearly quantitative –relative to the number of stressful life events experienced– and the other of a qualitative nature –relative to the emotional impact of each of the events experienced on a scale from 1 to 10. Reliability of the instrument with this sample of adolescents, according to the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was 0.71 for the "number of events experienced" subscale, and 0.76 for the "emotional impact caused by such events" subscale.

Procedure

Within the framework of the Collaboration Agreement described, two members of our research team visited 30 primary and secondary schools in Seville, covering five broad zones of the city. During ordinary lesson time, the participating boys and girls filled out the questionnaire designed by Oliva and his team in a self-administered fashion. Respondents' anonymity was guaranteed and the questionnaire took about 15 minutes to fill out.

RESULTS

The prevalence of stressful life events during adolescence and its relation to emotional impact

Figure 1 shows the sample distribution of the number of stressful events experienced by these boys and girls in the previous five years. We found a mean of 5.82 events, with a standard deviation of 3.62. With regard to emotional impact, we divided the total score by the number of events faced by each adolescent, so that this indicator would reflect average emotional impact, with the same minimum and maximum values for each adolescent, regardless of the number of events they experienced. The value of this indicator is 4.90 ($SD = 2.18$).

To complete the quantitative analysis of the stressful events experienced by the study sample, we explored the thesis of the accumulation of risk factors during adolescence through the assessment of everyday and negative stressful events. We found a Pearson coefficient of $r = 0.229$ on correlating the number of stressful events and average emotional impact, at a significance level of $p = 0.000$; that is, the greater the number of stressful events adolescents experience in their lives, the greater the emotional impact of each one

of them.

A qualitative approach to stressful life events during adolescence

In order to make a qualitative analysis of the available data, we examined each one of the stressors individually. Figure 2 shows the list of events assessed, which appear in order of frequency. Also shown is the mean emotional impact score obtained for each one of these events, on a scale from 1 to 10 (in brackets).

It can be seen, from the most common events that there is a predomination of those related to school (change of classmates, repeating a year, and change of school), together with death of a close family member. However the most impactful events were found to be those related to the family and personal contexts: one's own or one's partner's pregnancy (average emotional impact of 8.17 on a maximum scale of 10), death of a family member, and serious accident or illness (physical or mental) suffered by a close relative (6.75 in all cases). Having a serious accident or illness (6.47) and unfaithfulness of one's partner (6.53) came next in order of the emotional impact on the adolescents in our sample.

A joint analysis of frequency and emotional impact revealed the presence of highly frequent events which were, in turn, highly impactful, such as death of a family member or a serious accident or illness suffered by a close relative. However, other less frequent events also had a high impact on the boys and girls, such as one's own or one's partner's pregnancy (which affected 1% of the sample, with an average impact of 8.17), a mental health problem in a family member (present in 11.3% of cases but with a mean impact of 6.75), unfaithfulness of one's partner (found in 9.8% of cases, with a mean impact of 6.53) or addiction of a family member or close friend (present in 15.6% of cases, with an average impact of 6.15).

The experience of stressful events during adolescence according to sex

Working with a large sample of adolescents led us to explore the potential differences between boys' and girls' experiences of stressful events.

Table 1 shows the scores broken down for the boys and girls in our study, from a global perspective. The statistical comparison of these scores, assuming equality of variances at all times, revealed significant differences in the emotional impact of these events. The girls in our sample experienced each one of the stressors the most negatively ($t_{586} = 2.416$, $p = 0.016$), despite the fact that the number of events reported was similar to that for

their male peers ($t_{613} = 1.258, p = 0.209$).

In order to complete our exploration of stressful events in adolescence according to sex, we made a qualitative approach to this differentiation. In Table 2 we show the results obtained by boys and by girls for each of the stressful events assessed, considering not only the frequency of each event but also its average emotional impact. To check for possible differences in the accumulation of stressful events according to sex we used the Chi-squared statistic. In the case of emotional impact we used the t test for independent samples.

An initial consideration of the results shown in this table reveals a quite similar pattern for boys and girls in the sample, since the statistical tests indicated significant differences by sex only in the frequency and emotional impact of some events.

On the other hand, an analysis focused on the differences offers some interesting results. In the case of the girls, as well as change of school, we found a greater frequency of interpersonal problems compared to their male peers (being tricked or betrayed by a friend, quarrelling or breaking up with a friend). Among the boys, we found a greater presence of behaviour problems, both in school and in relations with their peers who are not friends. If we consider the most impactful events that are relatively frequent (experienced by more than a quarter of the adolescents), it is revealed that boys and girls experience some events with different levels of intensity, such as problems between parents (which affect girls more strongly than boys) and repeating a school year (experienced more negatively by boys).

DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to describe the prevalence of stressful life events during adolescence and its relationship to emotional impact. The results on the prevalence of stressors emerging from our work ($M = 4.90$) are quite similar to those obtained by the scale's creators (Oliva et al., 2008), and in line with previous reviews (Goossens, 2006), confirming the notion of vulnerability associated with adolescence to which we referred in the introduction to this work.

Likewise, it is not surprising that our research results allow us to confirm the thesis of the accumulation of risk factors during adolescence (explained at the beginning of this article) through the assessment of everyday, negative stressful events. The correlation between the number of stressful events and the average, positive and statistically significant emotional impact allows us to infer that the greater the number of stressful events

adolescents accumulate in their lives, the greater the emotional impact of each one of them.

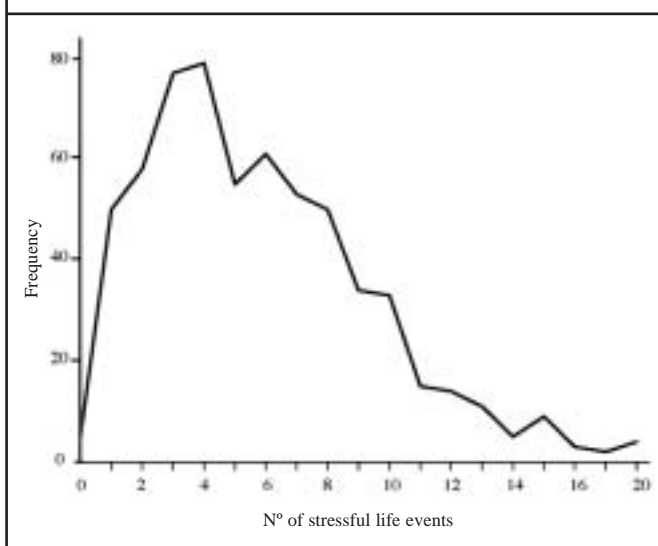
We agree with Rutter and cols. (1970, cit. in Atzabaporia et al., 2004) that this phenomenon may be due to the fact that adolescents' coping strategies become saturated when they face the need to respond to what is sometimes a considerable number of stressful events. With this in mind, there would be an overload on coping resources that would hinder the adolescent's capacity to respond effectively to stress, so that the emotional response to a stressor would be greater when he or she had been required to cope with other negative events previously.

Secondly, we proposed to follow a qualitative approach to explore stressful events during adolescence. The results of our study confirmed, through a large group of boys and girls from different parts of the city of Seville, that stressful events related to peers, particularly within

Table 1
Descriptive and contrast statistics for the accumulation and emotional impact of stressful life events experienced globally by boys and girls

	Boys <i>M (SD)</i>	Girls <i>M (SD)</i>	Contrast test
N° stressful life events	5.62 (3.76)	5.99 (3.47)	$t_{613} = 1.258$
Emotional impact	4.66 (2.15)	5.10 (2.18)	$t_{586} = 2.416^*$

Figure 1
Sample distribution of stressful events experienced globally



school, predominate during adolescence. However, the events that occur mainly in the family context, together with personal issues (especially those related to intimate partner relationships), have most impact.

The conclusions emerging from this qualitative exploration have, in our opinion, substantial implications for the field of family intervention. Stressful events experienced within the family make adolescents more likely to have difficulties in the emotional sphere. Therefore, a commitment to promoting stable and protective family environments, through parent training and support programmes such as the one we have developed in conjunction with the Seville City Council in the family preservation context, may work in favour of the emotional adjustment of the boys and girls who grow up in these homes.

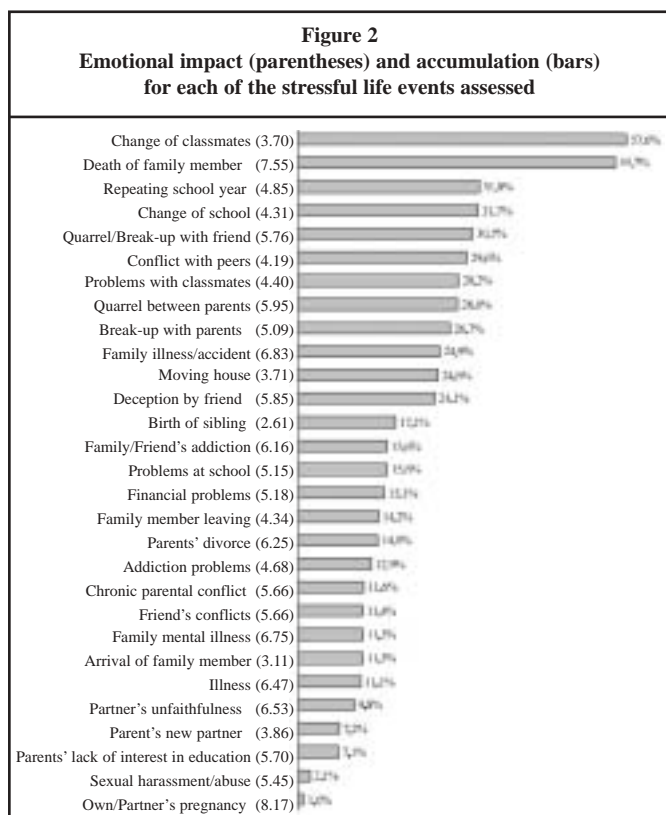
Thirdly, we have explored the potential differences in the experience of stressful events between boys and girls during adolescence. On the one hand, the differential quantitative analysis of the stressors to which the boys and girls in our study were exposed, revealed a greater emotional vulnerability of the girls in our sample, compared to their male peers. This is in contrast to some previous studies that have failed to find significant differences between boys and girls in terms of the emotional impact of such experiences (Kim et al., 2003).

An explanation of the differences found between boys and girls with regard to the emotional impact of stressful events may reside in the greater vulnerability of the latter to undergo emotional problems. It has been repeatedly shown that girls are more likely than boys to experience problems of internalization, depression and anxiety in adolescence, regardless of the country and culture in which the research was carried out (e.g., Abad, Forns, Amador & Martorell, 2000; Lemos, Vallejo & Sandoval, 2002). Although no consistent explanation has yet been proposed for this particular vulnerability, it may be that the experience of stress in adolescence occurs earlier for girls than for their male peers, and consequently before the development of the skills or competencies they need for coping with the new situations to which they must adapt during this period, resulting in greater emotional distress (Graber, 2004).

Furthermore, the differential qualitative analysis between boys and girls also provides interesting results with a view to guiding the development of preventive actions with adolescents in the field of psychosocial stress. A first reading of the results endorses the need to carry out preventive interventions applicable to all adolescents, regardless of their sex. And secondly, our data suggest how such actions can be adapted to the particular needs of boys and girls. Girls show particular vulnerability with regard to some aspects associated with the affective component of interpersonal relations, so it makes sense to pay more attention to that area when working with girls (Graber, 2004). Our results also highlight as an especially significant area in boys that of disruptive behaviours, particularly those related to the school context. These differences have been amply dealt with in the relevant literature (e.g., Martín & Velarde, 2001; Bruyn, Dekovic & Meijen, 2003), and would justify particular attention to the problems adolescent boys may experience in this field.

In sum, the detailed analysis we have made of psychosocial stress experienced by a broad section of adolescents permits us to draw some pertinent conclusions in the preventive and intervention contexts. The relevance of our findings resides partly, in our opinion, with some of the methodological decisions taken in the design of this research, which we shall briefly discuss.

In order to explore stressful life events during adolescence we opted to assess emotional impact using a self-report procedure, thus reducing the research costs without overlooking the richness of the psychological aspects of the experience of stressful events. However,



there are still few studies in which researchers have developed measures based on a transactional conceptualization, including questions on the degree to which these specific events are perceived as too much for the individual's resources (Grant et al., 2003). In this regard, we consider the present study to have added value in the field of applied research, since it has allowed us to obtain qualitative information relevant to decision-making in the field of intervention with adolescents. Moreover, the possibility of implementing this research with a large sample of participants gave us the opportunity to carry out differentiated analyses between boys and girls; analyses which helped to reveal the most relevant common aspects and particularities to consider in the design of intervention programmes adapted for each sex.

However, it is also important to consider the actual implications of this research for the field of prevention and intervention with adolescents. Notable among those emerging from our study is the importance of paying

attention to stressful life events during the adolescent period –an importance which, in our opinion, highlights the need to develop preventive actions that support effective strategies for dealing with the accumulation of psychosocial stress, and which promote positive adjustment processes.

Our data suggest the suitability of developing this type of intervention within schools, where the greatest accumulation of stressful elements is observed. If we bear in mind, moreover, that during adolescence peer interaction is largely circumscribed to school, that environment emerges as an especially appropriate context for promoting action aimed at developing strategies which permit boys and girls to cope satisfactorily with the accumulation of psychosocial stress.

While the above point is certainly true, we should also stress the need to develop actions in the family context, since to a large extent it is in this environment that boys and girls are most negatively affected by the stressful

Table 2
Descriptive and contrast statistics for the accumulation (AC) and emotional impact (EI)
of each stressful life event experienced by boys and girls

	Boys		Girls		Contrast test ¹	
	AC(%)	EI(M)	AC(%)	EI(M)	AC(%)	EI(M)
Change of classmates	43.5%	3.60	41.2%	3.75	n.s.	n.s.
Death of family member	46.9%	7.33	41.7%	7.72	n.s.	n.s.
Repeating school year	34.8%	5.38	28.8%	4.24	n.s.	t ₁₈₉ = -2.55*
Change of school	28.1%	4.29	34.6%	4.19	$\chi^2 = 3.10^*$	n.s.
Quarrel/Break-up with friend	21.9%	5.30	39.5%	5.97	$\chi^2 = 22.40^{***}$	n.s.
Conflict with peers	33.2%	3.82	25.2%	4.57	$\chi^2 = 4.77^*$	n.s.
Problems with classmates	29.7%	4.30	26.9%	4.50	n.s.	n.s.
Quarrel between parents	25.2%	5.38	30.5%	6.37	n.s.	t ₁₆₇ = 2.27*
Break-up with parents	26.5%	4.69	26.9%	5.41	n.s.	n.s.
Family illness/accident	24.8%	6.41	25.2%	7.25	n.s.	n.s.
Moving house	24.2%	3.65	24.6%	3.82	n.s.	n.s.
Deception by friend	17.4%	5.27	31.1%	6.17	$\chi^2 = 15.70^{***}$	n.s.
Birth of sibling	15.8%	3.40	18.5%	1.93	n.s.	t _{176,368} = -2.58*
Family/Friend.s addiction	16.1%	5.63	14.9%	6.73	n.s.	n.s.
Problems at school	18.7%	5.21	12.3%	5.03	$\chi^2 = 4.85^*$	n.s.
Financial problems	14.8%	5.26	15.2%	5.20	n.s.	n.s.
Family member leaving	12.9%	3.95	15.3%	4.53	n.s.	n.s.
Parents. divorce	11.6%	6.00	15.9%	6.28	n.s.	n.s.
Addiction	14.5%	4.51	11.3%	4.88	n.s.	n.s.
Chronic parental conflict	11.6%	5.18	11.3%	6.00	n.s.	n.s.
Friend.s conflicts	12.0%	4.81	11.0%	6.61	n.s.	t ₆₈ = 2.43*
Family mental illness	10.6%	6.18	12.0%	7.28	n.s.	n.s.
Arrival of family member	11.7%	2.44	10.7%	3.64	n.s.	n.s.
Illness	11.7%	5.94	10.7%	7.03	n.s.	n.s.
Partner.s unfaithfulness	9.7%	6.39	9.7%	6.53	n.s.	n.s.
Parent.s new partner	5.5%	3.13	8.8%	4.15	n.s.	n.s.
Parents. lack of interest in education	7.7%	5.35	6.5%	6.05	n.s.	n.s.
Sexual harassment/abuse	1.6%	5.33	2.6%	5.50	n.s.	n.s.
Own/Partner.s pregnancy	1.3%	8.00	0.6%	8.50	n.s.	n.s.

events they experience during adolescence. As various authors have pointed out, although in the adolescent period peers begin to take on a relevant role, the family context continues to be fundamental, and the results of our study serve to highlight this reality (Oliva, 2003).

Moreover, our results point to the appropriateness of working jointly with boys and girls in the development of coping strategies for stressful events, since they show a quite similar pattern with regard to the accumulation of psychosocial stress and its emotional impact during adolescence. This joint approach, however, should be tempered to attend differentially to certain needs of boys and girls, focusing particularly on the vulnerability of girls to stressful events affecting relationships, and taking into account boys' particular tendency to become involved in disruptive behaviours, especially at school.

To conclude, the present study sheds some light on the role of stressful life events during adolescence and its relevance for significant research and intervention with boys and girls during this period. There is a need for preventive interventions based on the results of studies such as ours, as well as further exploration of this area, especially in view of the potential relationship between these kinds of event and the development of adjustment problems during adolescence, an aspect not explored in this research.

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