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Raising Successful Children in a Stressed-Out World

JANE M. HEALY, *Educator and Author*

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An early childhood consultant visiting a preschool classroom observed a teacher asking each of her students the following question, which, with only one exception, received the same answer from every child:

Teacher: What did Mommy say to you before you left this morning?

Child: Hurry up.

Teacher: What did Daddy say?

Child: Hurry up.

A recent report found that almost a third of American youngsters now experience physical symptoms of stress, such as headaches, stomach aches, or sleep problems.¹ Another study indicated that up to half of U.S. children and adolescents meet diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health disorder by age 18, with chronic stress being a major component of problems such as anxiety or mood disorders.²

In meetings with parents, psychologists and teachers around the country, I hear about the daily reality of such statistics. “No, those numbers don’t surprise me at all,” a counselor at a top-rated

New York high school told me. “Every day I talk to kids who feel under overwhelming pressure to achieve—not only academically, but in all those extracurriculars to build the college resume. And then there’s all the social stuff—so stressful!”

Stressed Culture, Stressed Children

No New York parent needs reminding that Americans live in a “hurry-up” culture. Almost half of U.S. adults report concern about the amount of stress in their lives, with one-third describing themselves as “extremely stressed.”³ The American Psychological Association estimates that 43 percent of American adults suffer adverse health effects related to stress. Many blame the merry-go-round of work and activities that seem necessary to give their children advantages in life.⁴ Yet if children absorb chronic stress, their emotional growth and learning—and even their brain development—are likely to suffer. Most children can’t recognize or verbalize the effects of stress, which does its damage far below conscious awareness.

Scientists term chronic stress a “neural firestorm” that is especially hazardous for growing minds. Concerned parents and teachers watch for telltale signs and take concrete steps to help.

Good Stress and Bad Stress

“Hey, I want my son to experience some stress!” says one father of a nine-year-old. “Gets him motivated. It’s a tough world out there, and he needs to learn to deal with it.”

This dad is right—up to a point. Stress is necessary to keep the human brain tuned up, but only if it comes in appropriate doses. Faced with a positive challenge, the brain fires up to solve the problem, possibly even growing new cellular connections in

the process. Such “good stress” sharpens minds, boosts physical well-being and motivates us to take on more difficult challenges.

Characteristics of “good stress” are:

- The task is doable, but it requires reasonable effort
- It is seen by the child as worth doing
- The child feels some sense of control over the situation

One of the hardest tasks for parents and teachers is to be sensitive to that tricky balance point between positive, energizing motivation and debilitating stress. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, an expert on motivation, points out that two especially hazardous conditions for learning are anxiety and boredom. As he and his co-authors observe in their book, *Talented Teenagers*, “Anxiety occurs when we expect too much from students; boredom occurs when we expect too little.”⁵

The most damaging type of stress—for adults or children—is:

- Ongoing
- Threatening
- Unmanageable

For example, having an overly-demanding and critical parent, boss or teacher; fearing the daily assaults of a playground bully; being overwhelmed by a chaotic, unpredictable family situation with no end in sight.

Different Children: Different Needs

Individuals differ in their susceptibility to life’s stressors. New research targets genetic factors that impact the brain’s chemical transmission systems, but life experiences are also powerful de-

terminants of how—or even whether—these genes express themselves. For example, a number of studies pinpoint the role of prenatal stressors as well as the quality of early nurturing in calibrating an individual’s stress response.⁶

Many bright children with untreated learning problems are at particular risk of the negative effects of chronic stress. For a child with dyslexia, it is devastating to feel like a fool every day in class when asked to read aloud or quickly produce flawless written work. Chil-

Different combinations of genes make people differently susceptible to stress; repeated triggering of the stress response affects the way these genes are activated and makes the situation worse.

— dren with sensory processing issues are super-sensitive to noise, flashing lights, and tactile stimuli (“This shirt label is killing me!”), which chronically increase their stress load. Children, and especially teens, with social interaction difficulties may live out a daily horror story as they try—and fail—to relate appropriately in peer groups.

Clearly, it is important to identify and treat debilitating learning differences. It is also important in such cases to be especially vigilant about observing and relieving common stressors that can exacerbate any type of learning problem. But chronic stress is a serious concern for any child, as it can disrupt physical and emotional health as well as logical thinking, memory and attention. A stressed-out brain may be unable to access even what it does know, as with a child who frequently feels “put on the spot.” Although different combinations of genes make people differently susceptible to stress in the first place, repeated triggering of the stress response affects the way these genes are activated and makes the situation

worse.⁷ A stress-related condition termed “learned helplessness” causes the youngster to give up even before attempting anything that looks difficult. This problem requires sensitive treatment from an adult who can remediate both attitudes and learning strategies.

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A subtle, ubiquitous, and too-often unrecognized stressor is excessive use of electronic media. Inappropriate content is an obvious problem, but emerging research suggests other, more insidious effects on brain and body. For example, using a computer screen right before bedtime tends both to depress mood and to reduce the quality of sleep—not good for any child.⁸ This is one area in which parents can take a firm hand in monitoring and enforcing age-appropriate standards for both quality and quantity of exposure.

The Growing Brain on Stress

Stress originates in what is called the HPA axis (the hypothalamus and the pituitary and adrenal glands), which, among other functions, prepares us to respond quickly to a potentially harmful situation. The adrenal gland and its steroid hormone, cortisol, jolt our entire system into action without a lot of time wasted on intellectual debate. Cortisol is a remarkably useful and versatile hormone, but too much of it can have some nasty long-term effects on the immune system, the brain, and on learning.

Once the stress response has been initiated, the brain is likely to repeat the reaction to the same stimulus. If your child has a scary or embarrassing experience—say, with a certain

teacher, classroom or learning activity—her brain may start sending out danger signals every time she approaches the same situation. The more times this happens, the stronger the reaction. Any parent who has tried to talk a child out of a school phobia or severe test anxiety knows that something powerful is at work here. In fact, lower brain centers take over and can even shut down higher-level thinking centers when a “fight or flight” response is triggered. Psychologists who work with phobias and other deeply-embedded stress responses use techniques to gradually defuse the anxiety.

Too Stressed-Out to Learn? How to Recognize the Symptoms

Youngsters thrive on positive challenges, but since children differ dramatically in the level they can tolerate, concerned parents and teachers remain alert for signs of “bad stress”:

- As lower brain responses take over from the thinking brain, a child or teen may revert to “primitive” behaviors (striking out, tantrums, withdrawal). Others become hyper-vigilant, jumpy, hyperactive, distracted or anxious without knowing why. A stressed child may become oversensitive to any perceived threat (e.g. strikes out at a classmate who accidentally bumps him).
- Any negative changes in behavior may signal a potential problem. Young children, especially, can’t understand or explain what’s wrong, but may act irritable, moody, fearful or clingy; teens may become hostile or avoid previous friends. Eating problems may develop as stress interrupts digestion, causing stomach aches or “butterflies.” The heart rate speeds up and blood pressure rises. Sleep problems worsen.

- Children and teens may internalize the problem and say negative things about themselves: “I’m stupid.” “Nobody likes me.” “Everything’s so boring.”
- Stress exacerbates learning difficulties. For example, when responding to stress, the body narrows the visual field, which can interfere with eye movements for reading. For a severely stressed student, reading comprehension, math problem-solving, and anything demanding sustained thought or attention will suffer.

Remodeling the Stressed-Out Brain by Remodeling Children’s Environments

Let’s summarize some of the factors in today’s lifestyles that are problematic, especially for stress-prone youngsters. Then we will consider some proven stress reducers.

Hazards of the “Stress Culture” of Childhood

- Major family disruptors (chronic conflict, divorce, death).
- Untreated learning problems or school curricula which are out of line with a student’s level of development or previous teaching; overemphasis on high-stakes testing.
- Excessive media use, inappropriate content, or screen time that interferes with healthy sleep habits.
- Sensory overload such as excessive noise, flicker of fluorescent lights, or overcrowded scheduling.
- Lack of adequate sleep, inadequate physical exercise or separation from nature. Studies show conclusively that the human body and mind benefit from frequent exposure to grass, trees and park-like or country settings.
- Bullying (by students or teachers), peer rejection.

Clearly, some things are more under our control than others. Here are some proven tactics:

Buffers for Stress: What Parents and Teachers Can Do

- Take steps to keep your own stress level under control; be honest with yourself and consider seeking professional help if you feel things have gotten out of hand. Youngsters are highly susceptible to parental stress and cherish any relaxed time you spend with them (even when they don't admit it).
- Keep predictable routines whenever possible. Explain changes in routines ahead of time. Allow some time, if possible, for transitions between activities. Set the alarm a little earlier, if necessary, to get everyone out the door in a reasonably organized manner.
- Watch out for overscheduling. If you're worried that it's "too much," it probably is.
- Guide children in taking an age-appropriate role in any decision-making that affects them. Having some sense of control over one's own activities or work load is a great stress-reducer.
- Attend to physical health issues: be aware of current information on nutrition, allergies, sleep needs, and managing environmental toxins at home and school. A healthy body gives a child a head-start on stress management. We can't control everything, but every little bit helps.
- Many students need help in managing long-term assignments—breaking them up into manageable steps and entering a deadline for each step into a planner. This is one way a parent can reduce homework stress without doing the student's work for him. Study skills courses at school can also be a big help in getting control of unwieldy work loads. Teachers should

- collaborate in setting standards for reasonable amounts of homework, appropriately spaced.
- Parental hugs and calm reassurance work better than logical reasoning when a child is stressed. Teachers can let a child choose to go briefly to a quiet area of the classroom to decompress.
 - All adults must be alert to intercept any type of bullying. And of course, no teacher or parent should ever use sarcasm or verbal put-downs with any youngster.
 - Try natural stress-reducers for adults and children: yoga, tai chi or other movement activities; art; needlework; singing or playing a musical instrument for pleasure; outdoor exercise and exposure to nature; laughter and spontaneous play and fun. Make sure your family has frequent chances to simply lighten up. If you have a family or classroom pet, petting a friendly animal reduces stress levels.
 - Encourage free rather than programmed play. Children who look as if they are “wasting” time may be storing up stress resistance. All kids need time to decompress mentally and physically after a stressful day at school. They also need activities which are child-directed rather than continually being directed and evaluated by adults.
 - Let children hear positive messages when they overhear you talking about them. Parents, please wipe the worried look off your face when you return from a conference at school. A smile is a great tension-reliever for everyone.

You can vastly improve a child’s chances for successful learning by identifying and reducing sources of damaging stress. Remember that the human brain needs lots of unpressured time to grow and develop. Ease back, make time for laughter and spontaneous play, and enjoy the process.

Footnotes

1. Stress survey was conducted by the American Psychological Association in partnership with the National Women's Health Resource Center. *Monitor on Psychology*, April 2006, 28-29.
2. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (Vol. 49, No. 10).
3. See note 1 above.
4. *USA Today*, July 27, 2004, 6D.
5. *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Kevin Rathunde and Samuel Whalen, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
6. For a fuller description of this provocative research, please see Healy, J. *Different Learners*.
7. Gunnar, Megan and Quevedo, Karina. "The Neurobiology of Stress and Development." *Annual Review of Psychology* 58 (January 2007): p. 173.
8. Effects of VDT tasks with a bright display at night on melatonin, core temperature, heart rate, and sleepiness. *Journal of Applied Physiology* May 1, 2003 94:1773-1776.

Jane M. Healy is a teacher, educational psychologist, parent and grandparent. She is the author of several books about children's brain development and learning, including Your Child's Growing Mind: Brain Development and Learning From Birth to Adolescence, Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think And What We Can Do About It, and Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds—and What We Can Do About It.