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# STRESS IN CHILDREN: STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

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Everyone is affected by stress. Stress is a biological response to the demands made upon us by our environment, perceptions, and relationships. Harmful stress may adversely affect our bodies, our minds, and/or our behaviors. Sometimes, however, stress actually makes us feel good by energizing us to solve problems and to accomplish goals.

Every person reacts to stressors (events in the environment and/or perceptions that cause stress) and tells his or her story about stress in a different way. Young children seldom know what to call it, so they tell us indirectly (such as, "My stomach hurts." "My head hurts." "I can't go to school."). When a direct cause is not evident, the physiological response may be stress related. Adolescents know what to call it, yet are often unable to identify exactly what has caused the discomfort.

The same situation can affect children (or adults) in very different ways. A roller coaster ride may be a thrill for one child and a major stressor for another. Many children are adversely affected by too much activity. Yet another child may be adversely affected by under-stimulation. Although demands in life are natural, distress occurs when a child is unable to cope and/or believes or is unaware that his or her resources are less than sufficient to meet the challenge. The key is to adapt, alter, and find ways to turn bad stress (*distress*) into good stress (*eustress*).

## Basic Facts About Stress

Major life events such as death in the family, moving to a new home, or changing jobs were typically used to define stress in the 1970s and 1980s. Later, researchers looked at hassles or daily problems in living and found that these factors were just as predictive of stress-related illness as were major life events.

## Vulnerability to Stress

Although hassles and strain that may occur with some frequency on a daily basis continue to stress our children and have even escalated in recent years, some researchers have begun examining the effects of macro issues as additional stressors for today's youth. The children of today are exposed to multiple stressors as a result of changes taking place in the world today. The changes that may directly or indirectly predispose children to stress include breakdown in the traditional family and traditional neighborhoods, negative television and media messages (sex, violence, and unhealthy dietary behaviors), lack of positive role models including a reduction in meaningful contact with grandparents and close neighbors, unsafe environments (often inclusive of the school environment), inadequate housing, and exposure to war and terrorism.

## Causes of Stress

Most stress that children and youth perceive can be classified as school, home, and/or peer related.

**At school.** Stress in school is often over academic issues in the middle and high school years (fear of failure, not being smart enough, high stakes testing) yet can also include unclear expectations and lack of structure in the classroom.

**At home.** Home is a place where children want to be secure. Therefore, lack of structure, changes in the home environment (separation of parents, divorce), and confusing expectations can be very stressful. An abusive home is not a safe place, and the child suffers whether he or she is the target of the abuse or not.

**Peer related.** Peer relationships are very important to children and most important to children of middle school age. If the child can't thwart the behaviors of a bully, the results are stressful on



numerous levels. Fitting in or being popular has a powerful effect on American children, with these issues increasing at the middle school level. Some developmental hurdles are also school related. For example, moving from elementary to middle school can be a very stressful event for many children.

**Other sources.** Stressors also include developmental changes (being perceived as too big or small, puberty) and major events such as war or any other macro event children do not know how to control.

**Cumulative factors.** Stress is most often cumulative. We often see children handling many stressful events adequately, but the cumulative effect can cause them to get sick or lose it over the simplest injustice. Both the parent and the child may be surprised by the inappropriate behavior that was exhibited. Simply taking a look back at the child's day, week, or perhaps even the last month will often make parents more aware of the factors contributing to the child's distress.

### The Development of Stress in Children

**Symptoms.** Reactions to stress vary from one person to another; thus, each child may develop unique symptoms or individual styles of handling stress. A child's reaction to stress often changes with age. Symptoms of stress in young children are often difficult to distinguish from symptoms of minor illness. Common symptoms may include irritability, difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep, nightmares, toileting or eating difficulties, and headaches. Fears may take the form of clinging or anxiety when parents are not readily available to them. Children may use words such as "feeling bad" or "afraid" to express new or recurring fears. Periods of stubbornness or regression to earlier behavior are often indicative of too much stress. As children approach or reach middle school, their responses to stress may include attention-seeking behaviors, mood changes, anger, aggression, avoidance of certain activities, school refusal, or changes in the quality of their schoolwork, as well as common physical complaints (headache, upset stomach). Adolescents may isolate themselves in their rooms, be unwilling to participate in family or school activities, change their commitment to school work, begin experimenting with alcohol and other drugs, or demonstrate overt anxiety or anxiety mixed with depression, which may appear in the form of agitation. They may regress to using earlier coping strategies as well.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a complex health condition resulting from extreme stress in response to a traumatic experience: terrorism, war, being a victim of violence

(beating, rape), witnessing a violent act, natural disaster (flood, tornado), or a disaster caused by a human act (such as being in a structure that collapses). PTSD can cause severe problems at home and/or at school, and the symptoms typically occur within 3 months of the traumatic event. Symptoms in children and youth include sleep problems, nightmares, frightening thoughts, intense anxiety, and irritability. Often we mistakenly assume that children are fine after a trauma, yet they may still be in shock and may still exhibit symptoms at a later date. Children who demonstrate intense emotions after a traumatic event need to be reassured that they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal occurrence. If such assurances fail or if symptoms present themselves at a later date, assistance from a mental health professional (school psychologist, social worker) should be sought.

### Preventing Stress

- Be aware of the child's behaviors and emotions. Help the child find things that give personal pleasure and encourage the child to talk if there is a problem during the day.
- Set realistic expectations appropriate for the child's developmental level.
- Encourage the expression of feelings. Model awareness by using "I" statements when communicating with the child (especially at the elementary level).
- Teach the child to problem solve. Helping the child learn to take responsibility for decisions will enhance a sense of personal control.
- Teach and model emotional regulation. The earlier a child learns to use emotions to facilitate rather than interfere with setbacks, the better that child's response to stress will be.
- Encourage the child and adolescent to develop healthy relationships. Model positive interactions with others. Encourage the development of an inclusive network of friends. A network of healthy friends buffers against the negative effects of stress.
- Encourage physical activity as a means of releasing stress.
- Realize that children (probably in middle school) will be exposed to drugs and alcohol. Tell them that self-medicating with drugs and alcohol is a harmful way to cope with stress and will never solve problems.
- Over-scheduling children in group activities can escalate and produce stress. Plan time for the child to play or work alone and in small groups as well as in larger groups. Make sure the child's schedule is manageable.



- When a child makes a poor decision, listen without being critical. Use encouragement and natural consequences instead of punishment.
- Seek professional help or advice when signs of stress do not decrease or disappear, or if you know a child or adolescent has been a victim of a traumatic experience. The school psychologist, social worker, or counselor is often a good resource.

### How Parents Can Help Their Child Manage Stress

- Let your child know that he or she can trust you (be honest and reliable, be on time), that the home and neighborhood is safe, and that he or she is loved and an important member of the family.
- Keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes within the family such as a change in jobs that might require moving.
- Help your child feel a part of the move if the family is moving to a new neighborhood. This could be a visit to a nearby park or setting up a rope swing or swing set in the backyard.
- Be selective in the television programs you allow your young child to watch (including news broadcasts), which can produce worries and anxiety. Pay particular attention to and provide supervision for computer games, movies, and the use of the Internet.
- Contact your child's teachers if a problem occurs at school or if there is a problem that may affect school work. Your child's teacher wants to be informed and can help the child to re-engage.
- Consider consulting your physician if distress cannot be brought under control in a timely manner.

### How Teachers Can Help Children Manage Stress

As all children experience stress, the two dominant goals are to help children build protective assets/competencies and develop coping strategies that work to reduce or manage stress. For example, one coping skill is the ability to turn distress into energy to problem solve or create eustress.

#### Build Competencies in Schools

Three noteworthy organizations that promote diverse yet interrelated competencies in youth and communities, on a school- or district-wide basis, are: the Character Education Partnership, which promotes ethical and moral values in both staff and students and is (according to the website) "a nonpartisan coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to developing moral character and civic virtue in our nation's youth as one means of

creating a more compassionate and responsible society"; the Search Institute, which is dedicated to raising responsible children and teenagers through the promotion of developmental assets (positive values, social competence, and positive identity); and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which advocates programs that promote the social and emotional learning competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

The mission of these organizations is to promote learning communities that advocate the development of problem-solving/decision-making skills, emotional regulation, interpersonal/relationship skills, and self-awareness in our youth. Such competencies enable children to better confront the stress of our times and to be inoculated from the harmful effects of distress. (See "Resources" for contact information about these organizations.)

#### Teacher-Based Interventions

Teachers have a powerful influence on children, both positive and negative. When a problem in the classroom occurs, perhaps the most important first step is to avoid a global personalized response (such as, "She's a bad girl." "These are disturbed kids.") and to instead focus on the inappropriate behaviors ("Five children are not in their seats!"). Then, as a teacher, you can proceed to:

- Explain what is expected and why. Educators have an opportunity to be positive adult role models.
- Develop a pro-active classroom that is productive with limited class disruption.
- Encourage self-respect and respect for others.
- Remember the value of laughter and use it often.
- Be aware of children's behaviors, worries, and fears. Encourage them to talk if they have had a problem during the day.
- Contact the parent if a problem occurs at school that is not resolved. Most parents want to be informed and can help the child to re-engage.
- Involve children as helpers. Encourage them to make responsible decisions.
- Nurture and cherish all children and young adults. Accept and delight in their differences.

#### What Children Can Do to Reduce Stress

*Read this section with your child or student:*

- Talk about your problems. If you have trouble talking with your parents, talk with another adult such as a teacher or trusted friend.



- Learn strategies to manage your stress, such as taking time out to relax, listening to relaxing music, taking a warm bath, watching the stars, closing your eyes and taking slow deep breaths.
- Laugh and play a little everyday.
- Engage in exercise or sports.
- Pet your dog or cat. Watch your fish in the fish tank.
- Set realistic goals. Be honest with yourself and remember that no one is perfect.
- Love and respect yourself. Make friends who accept and respect you.
- Respect your parents.
- Accept others and be tolerant of differences.
- Enjoy solving problems. Handle your emotions before your emotions handle you.
- Know that drugs and alcohol may help you to fit in, but they never solve problems or reduce the long-term effects of stress.

## Resources

Brady, K., Forton, M. B., Porter, D., & Wood, C. (2003).

*Rules in school*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children. ISBN: 0-609-60297-7.  
A very clear and readable book on how to set up a democratic yet self-disciplined classroom. Rule structures in school help students deal with stress by setting a tone for individual responsibility, positive social interactions, and responsible decision making.

Elias, M. J., Tobias, S. E., & Friendlander, B. S. (1999).

*Emotionally intelligent parenting: How to raise a self-disciplined, responsible, socially skilled child*. Nevada City, CA: Harmony Books. ISBN: 0-609-60297-7.

Focuses on how parents can learn to communicate with their children on a deeper, more gratifying level and how to navigate relating to others, solving daily problems, and dealing with stress.

Karren, K. J., Hafen, B. Q., Smith, N. L., & Frandsen, K. J.

(2002). *Mind/body health: The effects of attitudes, emotions, and relationships* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings. ISBN: 0-205-32908-X.

Draws on landmark studies to demonstrate that stress, attitudes, and emotions do indeed effect physical health and that positive attitudes play a vital role in the prevention of illness. There are chapters on sleep, humor spirituality, stress, and anger.

Lantieri, L. (2002). *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers*. Boston: Beacon. ISBN: 0-807-03133-X.

Fourteen respected educators are asked whether schools can nurture the inner life of students

without violating the beliefs of families or their distinct faiths. Although not directly related to stress, the essays offer practical advice towards fostering emotional growth in children.

Lingren, H. (1998). *Children and stress*. Lincoln, NE:

University of Nebraska Extension (Neb Facts).

Available: [www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf387.htm](http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf387.htm)

Good discussion on protective factors that family can provide. Also included are ideas about how to avoid stressful situations.

United Federation of Teachers. (n.d.). *Students and*

*stress*. Available: [www.uft.org/?fid=255&tf=1390](http://www.uft.org/?fid=255&tf=1390)

Guide to causes of stress, symptoms of stress, and interventions. Includes information that is very helpful, both for working with students and for understanding stress in oneself.

## Websites

Character Education Partnership—[www.character.org](http://www.character.org)

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL)—[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)

Family Services Agency—[www.thefamilyworks.org](http://www.thefamilyworks.org) (See

Resources: Child Development and Parenting)

The Search Institute—[www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

Teen/Children's Concerns: Stress—

[www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/6729/stress.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/6729/stress.htm)

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