

Stress!!

Causes and Cures

Ideas from **Fresno Unified School District GATE Program**

Gifted children are particularly susceptible to stress, which if not checked may result in any number of chronic maladies or “burnout.” This is characterized by a state of mental and physical exhaustion from prolonged, unrelieved stress that can lead to withdrawal, hopelessness, and inactivity. Some developmental and behavioral factors leading to stress are:

Perfectionistic tendencies Children who suffer from perfectionism are in a constant state of frustration because of the ever-present gap between how they feel they are actually performing and their sometimes unrealistic, sometimes self-imposed achievement goals. This can lead to perfectionistic “freeze-up,” which is a type of stage fright or fear of failure associated with any new, perhaps threatening challenge.

Excessive achievement demands Pressure caused by the ambitious demands of well-meaning adults who want their kids to do their best at all times is undoubtedly a great source of anxiety for gifted children. Children are often plagued by questions of “Can I keep this up?” and “Will only more be expected of me now?” and sometimes camouflage themselves with underachievement.

Intellectual/social development gap Gifted children often have intellectual interests and abilities beyond their age peers, but lack the physical and social development to be accepted by older kids. The social isolation of a gifted student who feels “out of it” with age-mates and ignored by older kids can cause stress.

Heightened sensitivity to adult problems Gifted students tend to have voracious appetites for information about everything happening in their environment, from family problems to global issues, and this can cause stress. They often worry about problems that may not affect them directly, or over which they have no control.

An optimal level of stress energizes the system, but excessive stress usually decreases the academic performance of children, and can severely affect development. It is a child’s creative thinking – a hallmark of giftedness – that seems to suffer most. Excessive stress and anxiety can leave children unable to relax, displaying tension, extreme competitiveness, and impatience, and can lead to psychosomatic illnesses like headaches, stomachaches, and depression.

The following checklist can help parents and teachers determine how “stressed out” a child is. The more symptoms a child has, the more likely he or she is suffering from excessive stress. (Physical complaints should be investigated to eliminate other possible causes.)

- A major change in attitude or temperament (irritability, lack of enthusiasm, depression, carelessness)
- Withdrawal, outbursts, or tantrums for little or no apparent reason
- Hyperactive behavior (fidgeting, nervous tics, jumping from task to task, trouble concentrating)
- Suspicious complaints of fatigue and vague illnesses – “convenient” to avoid certain tasks or situations
- Insomnia or refusal to get out of bed
- Stomachaches or headaches
- An increase in allergic/asthmatic attacks
- Elimination problems

James Alvino recommends stress management through relaxation training that pays attention to attitude, behavior and environment:

Attitude refers to that set of beliefs, values, and responses that make up a person’s general outlook, composure, and comportment. Even young children can be guided toward optimism, belief in self, and an “internal locus of control.”

Feeling that one has no control over a situation can be quite anxiety-producing, but choice is very empowering. Parents and teachers can provide clear alternatives of what to do, information about the consequences of those alternatives, and a chance to **practice choosing** among them. In this way, gifted children can come to feel in control of their abilities, time and energy, and believe in themselves and their power to handle stressful situations.

An effective attitude-enhancing activity involves **positive self-talk**. Children who make negative assertions in the face of challenge (“I’m no good.”) need help stopping those, seeing their strengths and practice saying “I can do this.” “This is fun.” “I’m pretty good at this!” “I’ll try it!”

The technique of **mental rehearsal** can be especially helpful with children. Encourage the child to visualize each step and detail of an upcoming anxiety-producing event. Encourage the child to see himself or herself carrying out the task, dealing with any problems or obstacles that arise, and bringing it to a successful completion.

Together, work out alternative ways of handling the event so he or she will have maximum flexibility when it does occur. Preparation is an antidote to worry!

Behavior involves learning relaxation responses to stress and tension.

Focusing on just one problem may be effective. Children can pick one area of concern and *do* whatever is possible about that problem to feel that they have done their best, and further concern is unnecessary. After taking constructive action, they choose the next problem to think about and work on.

Practice muscle relaxation. Anxiety and relaxation are mutually exclusive. Autogenic training involves slowly tensing then quickly relaxing parts of the body. Progressive, whole-body relaxation is another technique, in which you try to relax the whole body (without tensing) from feet to ankles, legs, hips, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, neck, scalp, facial muscles and jaw. After children have learned and practiced relaxation, you can teach “cue controlled relaxation.” Children say the cue word (“relax”) or phrase (“calm down”) and relax completely until, after many repetitions, they just think the phrase and totally relax. Children can imagine (or listen to) an anxiety-producing situation, then immediately think of the cue phrase and relax, which counters the usual reactions of worry and stress. The final step is to use the method by themselves under any stressful condition.

Practice deep breathing. Children can be taught to sit comfortably, close their eyes, slowly breathe in through their noses, hold their breath to the count of four, and slowly breathe out through their mouths. Students can imagine any worries or upsets leaving their bodies as they breathe out.

Exercise reduces anxiety and promotes mental health at the same time. Pushing kids into organized sports can add to stress, but some kind of regular physical activity is important. Calisthenics, bike riding, jump rope and playground games are good sources of exercise. Engaging in any enjoyable activity can reduce tension.

Environment refers to those aspects of the child’s life that make up the pervasive conditions, primarily at home, under which biological, cognitive, and emotional growth are being nurtured. Here are some topics that can be discussed with parents:

Encourage a stress-reducing diet. Many nutritionists have suggested that excessive caffeine and sugar intake stress out the adrenal glands and induce tension. Therefore, children might be encouraged to limit consumption of foods with these substances.

Allow the “space” for daydreaming, relaxation, doing nothing and even just being alone. Build leisure into the child’s life and activities. Curb the need to accomplish something every minute. Cultivate respect for a slower pace. Encourage pursuit of a hobby that the child chooses. Take family vacations.

Respect the child’s heightened sensitivities. Helping gifted children deal with their feelings about “adult” issues takes a special effort. Global problems must be addressed on the child’s level, so that a seemingly enormous burden can be lifted. A child who is especially sensitive to world hunger, for instance, can be helped to find a concrete outlet for such “caring” by contributing allowance money to an appropriate cause or writing to government policy-makers.

Be a role model. Model the relaxed behaviors you are trying to cultivate in the child. Stress is very contagious, and your nonverbal behaviors (rushing, always seeming pressed for time, being impatient) will affect the child more than saying “Relax, don’t worry.” In addition, let the child know that it’s fun being an adult, how satisfying your work is, and how gratifying it is to help others. Give them this to look forward to!

Taken from Alvino, J. *Considerations and Strategies for Parenting the Gifted Child*. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (1995).

