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School Blues: Is Your Child A Victim?

by Ann Mosely

Parents send their kids off to school with high hopes for success, but what a child ends up feeling may be high anxiety.

Take a guess. Which is likely to cause your child the most stress: not making 100 on a test or the birth of a sibling? If you guessed the baby, you made the same mistake as many parents. On a scale of 20 stressful life events, over 1,000 children in grades four to six said a new baby was the least of their problems, paling in comparison to wetting their pants in class, being ridiculed, or not making 100.

Although parents and social scientists have long been aware of how children are affected by stressful events within the family (divorce, a new sibling or illness), little has been known about the pressures in a child's world away from home, the world of school. As researchers study children and stress, which they define as the body's response to any extra demand, they are beginning to focus more attention on this ignored arena of school life.

Academic and social pressures have made the classroom experience much more stressful than it once was. As University of Colorado educational psychologist Kaoru Yamamoto, Ph. D., comments in one of his landmark studies, "To many children, school life is a trying one that casts a long shadow."

The Pressure to Perform

Let's be honest here. Parents want their kids to earn good grades, be successful, and get ahead in life. We pass up a vacation to pay for the private school tuition. We skip our favorite TV show to read their favorite volume of Boxcar Children. We make sacrifices, large and small, to give our kids an academic break. And we expect a payoff. But in our quest for our children, our zeal may be harming rather than helping them.

San Francisco psychologist Paul Bracke, Ph.D describes an experiment he conducted with sixth graders. Blindfolded and with one arm behind the back, each of his 184 young subjects was asked to stack blocks for eight minutes. Their parents could offer suggestions from the sidelines.

The incredible part of the experiment was not how well the kids did. "It was a task that appeared silly," says Dr. Bracke. Most astonishing was that parents of Type A kids gave an average of 25 pieces of information, either encouragement, criticism, or direction, per minute. "That these parents were so invested in their children's performance on a meaningless task perhaps gives an indication of the pressures some kids in this country face," says Dr. Bracke.

Parents are not the lone perpetrators of academic anxiety. In studies of Type A kids (children who exhibit the characteristics of the adult Type A - aggressiveness, impatience, achievement striving, and easily aroused hostility, University of Pittsburgh psychologist Karen A. Matthews, Ph.D., has found that teachers encourage Type A behavior because Type A children do well on achievement tests and make good grades.

What well-meaning teachers and parents do not realize is that Type A behavior is a package deal. Along with the striving for achievement that propels these children toward school success is the angry, impatient component-and this has serious implications.

It is the anger and impatience that put adult Type A's at greatest risk for heart disease, and an estimated 60 to 65 percent of urban adults are considered at least moderately Type A. Research is not conclusive as to whether young Type A's inevitably grow up to be adult Type A's, but the findings are sufficient enough to cause concern.

"When we study these kids, we see some of the same cardiovascular symptoms, like sweaty palms and racing heart, as we find in high-risk adults," says Dr. Bracke. "It's disturbing when you consider that heart disease is the biggest killer in this country." Young Type A's also report a host of other physical complaints: headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, muscle aches, and fatigue.

The psychological effects can be just as devastating. "There seems to be an underlying insecurity in these children," says Dr. Bracke. "They may have a compulsive, perfectionist quality that makes them chronically anxious. While they perform well, they may not experience the joy and satisfaction of their achievements, because they are always looking toward the next goal."

The Fear of the Unknown

Picking up her daughter from kindergarten every day, Julie's mother routinely asked, "How was your day? Was school fun?" Julie would mutter "fine," then quickly change the subject. What she did not tell her mother was that each day she spent four hours in utter torment. "Julie was terrified that her mother would be late one day and that she would be locked in the classroom for the night," says California child psychologist Bettie B. Youngs, Ph.D., who conducts parent-child stress workshops across the country.

"Her fear may sound silly, but you have to remember that kids do not have the experience adults do. So many situations in their lives are new and frightening, and school is the biggest unknown. They experience stress because they really do not know what will happen to them at school."

A kindergartener, for example, was hysterically insistent that her father drive her to school every day. Patience exhausted, her parents eventually uncovered her fear of riding the school bus. She had never been on a bus before and did not know what to expect.

Other typical worries of this age are not finding the classroom and not understanding what the teacher says. By third grade, a child is more likely to fret about not having time to complete an assignment. The middle-school child, though certainly more experienced, will also be naive at times about managing the school environment.

One 12-year-old, whose best friend at school moved away suddenly, lost ten pounds in a month. "He was pining away," says his mother, "and I did not know what was wrong. When he finally blubbered out the story, I said, 'Well, why don't you call Colin in Pasadena?'" It was like, Eureka! That solution really had not occurred to him.

The experts look with gloom at the prospect of even earlier early education. What is the stress

forecast for kids who will be less experienced, less emotionally ready to tackle school? "We have a generation of kids who are not coping very well now," says Dr. Bracke. "Who knows what will happen if we add 4 year olds to the fire?"

The Power of Peers

Never underestimate the power of peer approval and disapproval. Give a child a choice between going under the knife for an operation or facing the humiliation of wetting in class, and the child will take the knife every time, according to Dr. Yamamoto's research. Want to create stress in a third-grader? Choose him last for the team, any team. How to unnerve a seventh grader? Pick her first, so that she has to lead.

"Parents underestimate the stress children feel when dealing with school friends," says Dr. Youngs, "and they overestimate their powers to cope."

For the younger child, key issues in relation to peers are likely to be sharing or taking turns. Some kids may not be able to master this with grace until age 8 or beyond, and it is not likely to endear them to classmates, who may tease, strike, or isolate the unsharing child. For other beginners, the classroom is their first field of competition, their first experience with being compared to other children.

"Carl was practically catatonic throughout kindergarten, " says his mother Judy. "He was used to undivided attention, and suddenly he had to share this mother figure with 25 other kids. He started bedwetting, would not eat, and was so angry."

By second grade, as peer relationships become more complex, the stress may escalate. "They get into the 'You-are-not-my-friend' syndrome, " says a mother of two. Or, "I am not going to play with you if you play with Karen." One of my daughter Kate's classmates - and understand that this is the friend she adores most - ran out of insults during a fight with Kate and yelled, "Your babysitter is fat and her slip shows." I wanted to laugh, but Kate was in tears over this.

Heavy stuff, but a drop in the bucket compared to the perils of preadolescence. "Conformity, fitting in, being liked, looking like the other kids, preoccupy the child from fifth grade on," says Dr. Youngs.

Stress: not getting a spot at the lunch table where the popular kids sit.

Stress: the wrong shirt, the wrong jeans, the wrong shoes, the wrong kind of hair.

Stress: the wrong body - too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny, too sexy, too sexless.

The catalog goes on. The question is, how do we help our children deal with so much stress in their lives, whatever the cause?

Stress Busters

In a softly lit room, with a tape of bird sounds chirping in the background, ten 5 to 7 year olds at Emerson Hospital, in Concord, Massachusetts, relax as an instructor repeats, "Breathe in energy, breathe out stress. Let the tension drain away."

In a Capable Kid class in Chicago, eight 9 to 10 year olds toss bean bags and insults at one another and practice comebacks:

"You are stupid." "Well, I got an A on my spelling test."

"I think you are ugly." "I really like my new haircut."

These programs teach kids how to relax, feel better about themselves, and find ways to solve problems. "Kids feel stress when they feel powerless," says Elinor White, Director of the Funtastics program at Emerson. "We give them the tools to make them feel in control."

Besides the relaxation exercises to relieve stress, Funtastics four one hour classes teach participants imaging techniques. Kids might picture themselves getting ready for a test: planning the study time, entering the classroom, taking a deep breath, and starting the test. "We tell kids, 'Think before you do things, and you will be much more powerful.' "

Using skits and games like the beanbag toss, kids practice how to handle teasing and other problems that cause them stress. "We give them a way to organize their feelings," says Dr. Saunders. "Most of all, we want them to learn to like themselves. Because a kid who likes himself is not threatened by the extra demands that produce stress - he is challenged."

White would like to see stress education become a part of every school's yearly curriculum. "We should think of stress management as a lifelong skill that needs to be practiced," she comments.

Meanwhile, in the real world, with stress programs for children few and far between, the experts offer these suggestions for parents:

Butt out

Remember the blocks stacked with one hand? "By being so involved when a child attempts a task, parents may deprive the child of a sense of competence. This may lead to insecurity, anxiety, and anger, as the child does not feel capable of meeting ever-escalating parental demands. Heavy praise can be as troublesome as criticism. "It is a two-way street, and the child gets the same message: 'Mom and Dad are always expecting something from me. I cannot satisfy them,' " adds Dr. Bracke.

Encourage your child to solve problems on his or her own

Children need to develop skills to deal with failure - which they will not get if you constantly come to their rescue. "If a child presents you with a problem, do not offer suggestions." Instead, you might say, "What do you think is the best way to handle this?" Let the youngster try out his choice. You have to help your child build a foundation of confidence in his/her own abilities.

Stay in touch

Most children are not skilled at articulating their feelings and may clam up altogether if they feel a parent will be judgmental or critical. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, authors of *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* (Avon, 1980), offer these four steps for getting through:

- Listen quietly and attentively at times when you have no distractions. Bedtime is a good time.
- Acknowledge feelings with just a word or two: "Oh... Mmmm... I see." Being neutral gives the child a chance to proceed.
- Give the feeling a name. "That sounds frustrating."
- Give the child his/her wishes in fantasy. "I wish Sean would stop saying mean things to you."

As the American family dwindles in size and influence, a child's life at school will have increasing influence. Although parents cannot control this life away from home, they can equip their child to deal with its stresses in a healthy way. Anxiety does not have to be a part of achievement.

And the most important homework you may want to do with your children is to teach them how to deal with stress.

Stress Passages

As children change, so do their anxieties. Here is what they fear most at each age, based on 10 years of clinical experience.

Kindergarten:

- Abandonment by a significant adult, including the fear that a parent may get killed during the day
- Punishment / reprimand from a teacher.

First Grade:

- Riding the bus
- Wetting in class
- Teacher disapproval
- Being ridiculed by class peers and older students
- Receiving first report card and not passing to second grade.

Second Grade:

- Not being able to understand a lesson
- Not being asked to be a teacher's helper and teacher's discipline
- Being different from other children in dress and appearance

Third Grade:

- Fear of peer disapproval and fear of not being liked by the teacher
- Being chosen last on any team
- Parent conference and staying after school
- Test taking and not having time to complete tests and assignments

Fourth Grade:

- Being chosen last on any team
- Peer disapproval of dress or appearance
- Having a friend select a different friend or share "their" secrets
- Student ridicule and not being liked by the teacher

Fifth Grade:

- Being chosen last on any team
- Losing a best friend

- Being unable to complete schoolwork and not passing

Sixth Grade:

- Being chosen last on any team
- The unknown concerning own sexuality
- Not passing, peer disapproval of appearance and being unpopular

Seventh Grade:

- Being selected first and having to lead or being picked last
- The unknown concerning own sexuality and not being able to complete schoolwork
- Experiences extreme concern and worry about emotional happiness

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