

Jill Crawford, LCSW

As Fall descends upon us and Summer fades to a collection of distant memories, certain annual rituals begin to take shape: bookbags are dug out of closets and alarm clocks are dusted off and set for the first time in months; the sun sets earlier and bedtimes are once again instituted; friends reunite and share tales of their summer; they may groan about the start of school or chatter about it excitedly; bathing suits and shorts are tucked away and replaced with school uniforms—either those required by specific schools or those dictated by the particular social code to which your child adheres. And just as certainly as these events will happen, my phone will begin to ring with increasing urgency. The annual hallmark of Fall in my line of work is escalating anxiety in children, teenagers, and, of course, by natural extension, parents.

Even for the most academically and socially inclined children, the start of school is an obvious source of stress following a relaxing summer with few, if

any, demands. Structure and routine are reinstated, schoolwork begins to pile up, and an endless variety of extracurricular activities begin. For children who struggle with learning, following directions, or interacting with peers, the stressors brought on by school can be overwhelming. As parents, teachers, or adults involved with children in some other capacity, it is essential that we are able to recognize the many sources of stress children face, the signs of stress found in children at different developmental levels, and to possess an understanding of some positive coping strategies we can teach our children and encourage them to use.

SOURCES OF SCHOOL-RELATED STRESS

The things children worry about in elementary school will obviously differ from the stressors they endure in middle and high school. Nonetheless, in the eye of the beholder, each particular stress is of paramount importance and has the potential to snowball with

surprising speed and strength if not dealt with appropriately. Here is a list of some of the major anxiety triggers that children and teenagers identify:

- ▶ Starting a new school
- ▶ Worry about schoolwork, grades
- ▶ Test anxiety
- ▶ Dealing with a learning disability
- ▶ Fear of being called on
- ▶ Fear of wetting self
- ▶ Playground / lunchroom politics
- ▶ Fear of being chosen last for a team
- ▶ Fear of consequences from teacher, administrator
- ▶ Worry about changing bodies
- ▶ Fear of not fitting in—having the “right” body type, the “right” clothes, etc.
- ▶ Fear of teasing, bullying, violence
- ▶ Worry about being away from home
- ▶ Worry about being chosen for selective activities, such as sports teams, plays, band
- ▶ Peer pressure—drugs, alcohol, sex, cheating
- ▶ Not being part of a clique
- ▶ Not having a place to sit at lunch

In addition to these school-related stresses, there are many other anxiety-producing events or situations that a child may be enduring at home or elsewhere. These anxieties, although not specifically derived from school, will almost certainly find their way into the school environment and affect a child’s school functioning. Some examples of these stressors are:

- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ Remarriage
- ▶ Stepparent / Stepsibling issues
- ▶ Adoption
- ▶ Death of a loved one
- ▶ Death of a pet
- ▶ Geographic move
- ▶ Persistent family conflict
- ▶ Financial strains
- ▶ Legal problems
- ▶ Domestic violence
- ▶ Parent unemployment
- ▶ Abuse
- ▶ Neglect
- ▶ Family member serving in the military
- ▶ Parent substance abuse
- ▶ Chronic illness / disability of self or family member
- ▶ Exposure to frightening events in the media

When examining concerns related to a child's anxiety, it is important to look at the big picture, not just at what is obvious. Think critically: behavior problems in school may not be evidence only of school problems, but possibly other stress with friends or family. Ask questions. *Listen* and *observe* closely. Become experts on the children with whom you interact, whether you are the parent, another family member, babysitter, teacher, coach, guidance counselor, or therapist.

SIGNS OF STRESS IN CHILDREN

Stress takes many forms and may not show up exactly looking like anxiety in certain children. What follows is a list of possible signs of stress in four different categories: emotional, physical, social, and behavioral:

Emotional

Excessive worry
Irritability
Sadness
Frustration
Anger
Neediness
Tearfulness

Fearfulness
Agitation
Sensitivity to noise
Low self-esteem
Distrust of others / the world
Confusion
Apathy
Indecisiveness

Physical

Loss of appetite
Stomachaches
Headaches
Dizziness
Hyperactivity
Tics
Psychomotor agitation
Speech impairments
Acne / Rashes
Muscle tension
Fainting spells
Heart palpitations
Nausea / vomiting

Social

Withdrawal / isolation
Intrusiveness (poor boundaries with others)
Family conflict
Peer difficulties
Lapses in social judgment
Arguing
Separation anxiety
Teasing
Bullying
Extreme shyness

Behavioral

Loss of concentration
Overeating
Aggression
Anhedonia (loss of interest in formerly pleasurable activities)
Nightmares
Making unhealthy choices
Clinginess
Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, bedwetting)
Impulsivity
Tantrums
Poor hygiene
Noncompliance with rules
Insomnia
Hypersomnia
Truancy
Complaining
Decline in grades
Overreacting
Losing temper

When left untreated, or when stressors are chronic and do not diminish over time, a stress reaction may evolve into a more serious psychological or medical condition. It is important to address the sources of the stress, either informally or with professional help. Many stressful situations are temporary and will pass quickly, and the stress symptoms will recede. More longstanding and severe stressful situations are cause for

greater concern. Children exposed to chronic or recurring stress should be considered at-risk, and will benefit from developing a set of adaptive coping strategies to help them manage their mood, behavior, relationships, and self-esteem. Different individuals will take to different strategies, preferring the ones they enjoy most or those that seem to work best at de-escalating their anxiety.

STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES (a.k.a. "COPING SKILLS")

Exercise is a wonderful way to reduce stress and anxiety. Children tend to gravitate toward high-energy stress release as opposed to more quiet, relaxing activities. Encourage your children to burn nervous energy by walking, biking, running, swimming, skateboarding, or dancing. Being involved in regular exercise of some sort, like a karate class or school or community league sport, is a great way of combating chronic stress.

Play! The benefits of play cannot be overstated. Play offers time and space for

leisure, recreation (there's that exercise thing again!), creativity, socialization, and fun. Laughter is an often overlooked way of reducing stress. Research has shown that deep belly laughter actually suppresses the body's naturally occurring stress hormones and boosts the immune system.

Music—Listening to or making one's own music can be extremely therapeutic. If your child tends toward loud, grating, headache-inducing music, encourage headphones rather than discouraging this great outlet for expression, productive thought, and creativity.

Journaling—Often, children who have difficulty verbalizing their feelings or organizing their thoughts will benefit from writing in a journal. Parents take note—journals are deeply personal and should be respected as such. Even though you may be tempted, no peeking! The only time I ever endorse peeking is when there are serious concerns for a child's safety, which is another discussion altogether. When used properly, journals can be wonderful places for children to express their thoughts, fears,

dreams, and goals without shame, fear of embarrassment or consequence, and to process complicated feelings. Many of my clients have come to important life decisions only after spending time journaling.

Art—For those children with creative leanings, art is an excellent way of self-soothing, expressing oneself, and working through stress.

Reading—Settling down with a book provides all too rare opportunities for peace and quiet away from the constant stimulation we face in our daily lives. For many children, reading is a relaxing escape from reality and a time for quiet reflection.

Visualization / Imagination—I have often asked overwrought children to take a “one-minute vacation” to their favorite place in order to calm themselves down. This pretty much involves them closing their eyes, envisioning themselves in a place where they feel peaceful and safe, and “staying there” for a minute. During this exercise, I typically observe signs of stress reduction such as rapid breathing slowing down, fists unclenching, and foreheads

uncreasing. Another favorite exercise of my younger clients is to imagine they are a turtle who can retreat into his/her shell when things are becoming too overwhelming. They can imagine how safe and quiet it is inside the shell, and harness that feeling of being protected. The only rule is that, while they're “in there,” they have to come up with at least one solution to the problem at hand that they'll try when they “come out.”

Yoga—not just for us stressed-out grown-ups! Kids love it! Learning to stretch, breathe deeply, and just sit quietly sometimes are great skills, and it's never too early to learn! There are great yoga kits for kids on the market today.

Taking Space—Children spend very little time alone nowadays. Many kids don't even know what to do with themselves when they're not being constantly entertained or stimulated. Giving children permission to take space by themselves, and maybe even prompting them to do so if they are unable to recognize this need on their own, can be an invaluable gift to those dealing

with stress. As concerned adults, it is often our tendency to crowd our children until we do our detective work and find out what's wrong and how to fix it. Despite our best intentions, this can make children feel smothered. And besides, children take their cues from us grown-ups. If they see us worrying and feeling anxious, it certainly won't help reduce their anxiety. So try to relax and give your kids space. Most likely, they'll come to talk when they're ready.

Quality Time With a Supportive Friend or Family Member

—Okay, so this sounds completely contrary to giving kids space when they're stressed. The important thing to remember here is: Make yourself available. Let your child know you're prepared to listen and offer support when he or she is ready. If you feel your child needs to take a break from a stressful situation, spend a few hours or a day just having fun, taking a break from reality. The stressful situation will likely still be there waiting when you get back, but a time-out from stress can be incredibly restorative...

If signs of stress continue to escalate, and the stressful situation(s) shows no indication of being resolved anytime soon, consider involving a mental health professional.

Oftentimes, having a neutral person to confide in provides great relief for an anxious child. He or she doesn't have to worry about hurting anyone's feelings or being embarrassed. Being able to problem-solve with someone who is objective, rather than deeply immersed in the stressful situation, can be an invaluable asset to children and parents alike. A competent therapist will be able to assess all aspects of the situation, help the child and family identify attainable goals, work from a foundation based on the child's and family's inherent strengths, and build a strong relationship with the child so that he or she and the family feel comfortable opening up and working productively on the issues at hand. If addressed in a timely fashion, a mental health professional may also be able to help head off a burgeoning anxiety or mood disorder.

Stress is virtually unavoidable in today's world. In fact, it is everywhere we look. The keys to successfully managing stress are identifying the source(s) of stress early, garnering your supports, and working actively to manage stress symptoms in order to minimize the impact of stress in your child's life.

Jill Crawford is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in child/adolescent and family therapy. She has a private outpatient counseling practice in Malvern, PA. For more information, call (610) 564-6835 or visit www.jillcrawfordcounseling.com.