

Stress Management and Gifted Children

Vidisha A. Patel

What can parents and teachers do to understand and help gifted kids with stress management?

Noah is a 12-year-old boy in a full-time gifted program. His mother recently brought him to my office because he is struggling in school. Until this year, Noah was a solid honor roll student, with very little effort. Now, he is at risk for failing some of his courses. He doesn't seem to have friends, and teachers are frustrated with his behavior.

A mother called me about her 10-year-old daughter, Nancy, who is having trouble getting to sleep at night. She is perfectly happy until it is time for bed. Then she cries, asks her parents to sit with her, and says that she is afraid. When asked what she is afraid of, she responds, "I don't know."

Dwight is a 3rd grader in a full-time gifted classroom. He is an excellent math student who knows all his math facts. Yet, when he has to complete the timed multiplication tests, Dwight consistently scores below 60 percent. He frequently wakes up in the morning with a stomachache and dawdles to get ready for school. Until this year, Dwight was up and ready for school without prompting.

Sandra calls her mother every day at lunchtime saying that she forgot some papers, doesn't have her lunch money, or left her lunch on the bus. Her mother cannot understand why she has become so forgetful. Sandra is in a mainstream public school pullout gifted program for reading and math and stays with her classmates for the rest of the day.

Taylor has been an honor roll student for her entire school experience. She is concert master of the high school orchestra, track star, dedicated volunteer, and president of her class. Her mother brought her in to see me because she noticed that Taylor was pulling at her eyebrows. She had almost no eyebrows left. When questioned, Taylor explained that she was nervous about getting into a good college.

What do all these kids have in common? They are all classified as gifted, they are all successful, and none of them see their own strengths. They doubt their abilities, and they are stressed! How does this happen? We usually think that youngsters who appear to be successful and smart truly feel that way inside. In fact, there are many gifted children who excel outwardly but on the inside are extremely anxious.

Stress can affect anyone, and gifted children are no exception. Giftedness can sometimes be the cause of the stress. Perfectionism, sensitivity, and intensity are characteristics of gifted children that may exacerbate stress.

Stress can be constructive. Positive stress provides motivation and energy—an adrenaline rush to help finish the report that is due tomorrow, motivation to run the last 50 yards to win the race, help to maintain the strength to make it to the tie breaker of a five set tennis match, or a focus on studying for exams.

Prolonged stress, however, with no time to recover becomes detrimental. Continued stress upsets the efficiency of one's body and performance. Stress becomes negative when energy level has peaked. Then it is injurious to a student's



Stress Management, continued

well being. That may be when a child shuts down. The peak is different for every individual. You can help by understanding your own stress "peak" and helping him discover his. By learning how to recognize when stress is on the verge of becoming detrimental, you can help students benefit from positive energy and prevent the damage of ongoing stress.

"...there are many gifted children who excel outwardly but on the inside are extremely anxious."

When a child experiences stress she appears to be out-of-sync with herself. She may find it difficult to focus on the task at hand. She may develop negative attitudes about a particular subject, friend, or life in general. Frequently she will become easily fatigued and even ill. In specific instances a child can experience accelerated breathing or changes in heartbeat. Like Dwight, the young person may have headaches or stomachaches. Muscle tension such as a sore neck or shoulders can be another symptom of stress. Some children have nightmares and may start grinding their teeth. In the younger set, there may be a reversion of behavior such as bed wetting. Prolonged stress can also manifest itself in self-soothing behaviors such as thumb sucking, nail biting, and hair pulling, as with Taylor. Sometimes youngsters become extremely regimented in their behaviors following rituals before bed or school or prior to taking tests. Fears that seem unreasonable may also develop as symptoms of underlying stress, such as Nancy's fear of going to sleep.

Emotional symptoms of stress are frequently seen as irritation, excessive worrying, anxiety, tension, frustration, and anger. A child may become easily frustrated with work or lash out in anger over a seemingly small issue. When asked what he is upset about, he may respond that he doesn't know. While "I don't know" can be frustrating to an adult, it is most likely the truth.

General stressors that affect gifted children can be classified into four main categories; academic, social, family, and self.

Academic stress typically refers to grades, success on tests, and papers at school. Mr. G, a teacher of gifted students, related the story of 9-year-old Thomas who was upset and in tears, anticipating his math grade. He was fearful of his father's probable reaction when the math paper was brought home. Thomas finally calmed himself enough to show Mr. G his paper, which had received 97%! Thomas said that his father expected 100% and would get angry if the boy brought home anything less.

The teacher's experience with Thomas is an example of how parents can unintentionally add to the stress of their children. Gifted children tend to be very hard on themselves to perform whether it is academically, socially, or creatively. Parents' expectations or perceived expectations may add to the stress that these children place on themselves.

In today's society, family stressors play a large role in the overall anxiety of gifted children. Families that do not have enough time together or where children need to take on more responsibility can add pressure. Single parent homes or divorce situations where there is animosity can also add to stress. Intact families where both parents work outside of the home and there is little time for relaxed interaction can be detrimental, too. Gifted children are frequently hypersensitive to situations. They pick up on underlying discord and animosity. Without fully understanding their own discomfort, they may take on responsibility for those feelings. Financial difficulties faced by parents can also be absorbed by gifted children.

Social pressures at school are probably one of the most prevalent stressors faced by children today. Students can be quite unkind to each other. Gifted children who are mixed into the standard school curriculum may find themselves the victims of bullies, or they may feel ostracized. Lunchtime can often be a difficult time when social power dominates, and cliques are usually at their peak.

Sandra's daily call to her mother at lunchtime turned out to be because of her anxiety at finding friends with whom she could eat lunch. Because she was pulled out for certain classes, Sandra felt different from her classmates. She was frequently teased by them for being smart, and she felt left out. Sandra was not able to verbalize these feelings to her mother so she chose to reach out by calling every day at lunchtime.

Other social stressors that children face include gossip, labeling, and cyber bullying. This social tension may be difficult to uncover. Children frequently feel that no one will understand or that there is something wrong with them. It is imperative for parents and teachers to keep the lines of communication open so that youngsters know they have someone who supports them.

Gifted children are probably their own biggest stressors. These young people tend to impose restrictions and expectations on themselves. They may be perfectionists who would rather procrastinate on an assignment than hand in something that is not perfect. Procrastination combined with perfectionism exacerbates the problem. While stress in this instance is a direct result of their own beliefs, gifted children still need the help of their parents and teachers to overcome these challenges.

Helping and guiding children to manage their stress is a multidimensional process. Parent, child, and teacher have

Stress Management, continued

equally important parts to play. The focal point of the solution is the child, who needs to take charge of her feelings and actions. With support, she can learn how to accept responsibility and manage her emotions.

“ Stress can be constructive...Prolonged stress, however, with no time to recover becomes detrimental. ”

Following are helpful suggestions:

- Teach children to recognize when they are entering a negative looping cycle of thought. Help them identify and break out of this mode. Brainstorming alternate thoughts and emotions ahead of time gives children variations to help replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- See that children get adequate food and sleep.
- Teachers can model healthy emotional responses and support children in their academic learning, thereby boosting self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Teachers observe many social interactions and behaviors at school that parents may not see at home. Their insight into a child's emotional health is an invaluable asset for any family.

The key to success is for teachers, children, and parents to communicate clearly and honestly with each other. Children need to be taught to understand that whatever they feel is okay. In every moment they have a choice: Do I want to continue to feel this way or do I want to feel something else? They have full control at all times to choose how they feel.

By building solid relationships and open communication with children, parents can help their young ones become the best that they aspire to be. Stress free living is really just an emotion away.

Vidisha Patel is a therapist in Sarasota, Florida, where she works with gifted children and their families, focusing on stress and anxiety.