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Stress and the elementary school student: Implications for the elementary school counselor

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Stress and the elementary school student: Implications for the elementary school counselor

Abstract
Elementary children, like anyone else, experience stress. Their world is not nearly as safe and protected as most people believe (Shapiro and Rylewicz, 1976). They have fears and anxieties that are just as threatening to their lifestyles as adults. However, where adults may understand the signs of stress, most children do not understand their reactions to stress or how to deal with stress.

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Stress and the Elementary School Student:
Implications for the Elementary School Counselor

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Stressors and the Elementary School Student: 
Implications for the Elementary School Counselor

Elementary children, like anyone else, experience stress. Their world is not nearly as safe and protected as most people believe (Shapiro and Rylewicz, 1976). They have fears and anxieties that are just as threatening to their lifestyles as adults. However, where adults may understand the signs of stress, most children do not understand their reactions to stress or how to deal with stress.

Stress applies equally as a form of stimulus (stressor), a force requiring change of adaptation (strain), a mental state (distress), and a form of bodily reaction or response (Rutter, 1981). Moracco and McFadden (1982) defined stress as an alteration of psychological homeostasis resulting from aspects of the individual's job that are perceived as threats to the individual's well-being or self-esteem. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) viewed stress as any event that is appraised as a threat to an individual's well-being or self-esteem. Stress is now viewed as a complex state transcending the usual mindbody dichotomy and requiring a reference to holistic frames. That is, stress must be factored into a stress equation through physiological, psychological, and sociological components. Stress becomes understandable only if there is a focus on the dynamic, transactional process (Kremer and Owen, 1979).
Selye (1956, 1974, 1975, 1976) defined stress in terms of physiological reactions to environmental stimuli. The demands, which Selye labeled as stressors, are triggered by either pleasant or nonpleasant situations. Thus, any change in the lifestyle of an individual can lead to stress, which is a disruption of homeostasis or balance within the body. In addition, Selye (1956, 1974) reported that individuals respond to stressors in three temporal stages. Once a person recognizes a stressor, it goes from the alarm stage to the resistance or adaptation stage, to the final stage of exhaustion when the individual's ability to cope breaks down.

Stress, according to Cohen (1978), involves a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment. This dynamic interaction lends itself to chronic stress. Chronic stress results from a perceived imbalance between demands and resources to meet demands, coupled with inadequate responses by the person to cope with the demands (Thoresen and Eagleston, 1982). To accommodate the individual differences in the activation of the stress response, theorists and researchers introduced cognition as a moderating variable. Cognition was introduced, however, as a physiological process by describing it in terms of the reticular activating system of the brain (Stensrud and Stensrud, 1983).

To understand the stressors a child is experiencing, a differentiation between stress and anxiety is necessary. Anxiety is what people feel when stress is placed upon them. It is the reaction to
stress (May, 1977). Stress is the cognitive component of anxiety that brings about lowered levels of performance.

Individuals react differently to stress (Mason, 1974). Different individuals respond to the same stimulus event in different ways, and the context intensity and duration of the exposure have differential effects on individuals (Appley and Trumbull, 1965). Kremer and Owen (1979) suggest there is no common stress reaction. What is stressful for one person may not be for another, and when two people are under stress their reactions may be quite different in physiological, psychological and sociological expression.

Despite the myriad of definitions of stress, the studies of stress have approached the problem in four different ways. The first approach focused on the stimulus parameters or "stressors" (Benswanger, 1982). This approach was spearheaded by Holmes and Rahe (1967) who identified the elements that distinguish the level of stressful life events so one can develop an "index of life stressors."

The second approach deals with those who concentrate on the response to stress and examine its' emotional and physical effects.

Approach three delves into the interaction between stressful events and their effect in mental and physical illness. A similar approach has been used by many including Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1974), Paykel (1974), and Garrity, Marx, and Somes (1978).

The fourth approach integrates a number of interacting factors which gave stress a more dynamic, comprehensive outlook. Lazarus (1971) and
Levi (1974) use factors such as developmental status, individual coping models, family groups, and social-cultural settings. This method coupled with variables of cognition accommodates the individual differences people have in their reaction to a stress response. This comprehensive approach utilizes data from a variety of disciplines. Counselors who use this approach examine the interdependent parameters of stress and consider the implications of developmental changes in analyzing the context and outcome of stressful events in childhood (Benswanger, 1982).

Stressful events occur daily, although the meaning and impact of any stressor may vary for each child. The question that counselors must ask are when, where and how these events occur, what are the positive and negative consequences, and what additional information is needed to provide appropriate coping skills.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of stressful life events on elementary school children. Despite the myriad of stressful life events that can occur this paper will deal with the events that are prevalent in a school setting and will suggest how counselors can implement coping remediation that can enhance student self-esteem and well-being. Three basic stressors important in the life of an elementary school student in a school setting include (a) Teacher Stress in Relationship with the Student; (b) Parental Expectations - Emotional Abuse; (c) Divorce.
Factors of Child Stress

Knowing what young people worry about can assist counselors, principals, and concerned parents to understand them better and aid their development (Crowley 1981). By examining our way of life, the stresses we face, our strengths and weaknesses, and our capacities for managing stress, we can develop a plan for a less stressful life-style (Bayerl and MacKenzie, 1981). These plans will take the necessary steps that will help students cope with life and enjoy a certain measure of happiness.

A key in managing life's stresses is to lead a more balanced life. However, our perceptions of events as either threats or challenges can determine whether or not they are stressful for us (Woolfork and Richardson, 1978).

Bauer (1976) found that over 55% of sixth-grade students expressed concerns that involved bodily injury and physical harm. Kovacs and Beck (1977) concluded from their study of seventh and eighth-grade students that the higher the rating by teachers of students' performance in the classroom, the lower the scores obtained by these students on a depression test. The top six worries of third through eighth-grade students as being grades, homework, injury to self, injury or death of loved ones, being yelled at, and fighting (Crowley, 1981). In a related study, Yamamoto (1979) found that the top five worries of elementary students in fourth through sixth-grade were losing a parent, going blind, academic retainment, wetting in class and parental fights. Yamamoto and
Phillips (1981) had similar results in a study with Filipino children. The only difference was the Filipino students had ridiculed in class instead of wetting in class.

Adams (1968) and West and Wood (1970) found school-related problems were most pressing in adolescent students. Four factors in school related stress among students were: parental stress, peer stress, importance of school, and fear of failure (West, Wills, and Sharp, 1982).

Teachers

The constant relationship between teachers who are evaluating and students who are trying to measure up makes the classroom a potential stressful place. Teachers need to realize they are also under stress from outside pressures. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977) defined teacher stress as a human response of negative affect as a result of demands made upon an individual in the role of teacher. These pressures can cause a teacher to act in ways that will greatly increase the tension for children in a classroom. Teachers under stress are likely to be less patient and more intense in their enforcement of behavioral standards, as well as, more rigid in their teaching. They are quick to scold and humiliate and they may be unaware of the messages they convey through sighs, frowns and grimaces. This will give the more vulnerable and stress-prone children a reason to pick up on the slightest signs of disapproval and feel at once on guard (Johns and Johns, 1983).
Teachers report a great deal of stress in their work. Bloch (1978) described a syndrome of battle fatigue in teachers resulting from stress experienced on the job. Stress affects teacher behavior and may reduce their effectiveness in the classroom which could result in child stress.

Moracco and McFadden (1982) relate the syndrome to being one in which the teacher attempts to cope with stress by distancing a behavioral manifestation. This distancing can be emotional and physical. Emotional distancing includes developing a callous attitude toward students. Often, teachers experiencing stress refer to students in demeaning ways. This can only enhance teacher-student friction and develop stressful situations.

Elkind (1981) notes adults overburdened by stress, tend to focus inwardly and become less sensitive to the needs of children.

Teachers who mandate children succeed at all costs, can only cause stressful relations. Teachers need to acknowledge students feelings. When one ignores the individual differences in students it forces the child to grow up before they are ready. This is often the case with teachers under stress, because they look inwardly and forget that the children outwardly also have problems. Hopefully, teachers under stress can realize their limitations and nurture their students to a high degree of self-worth, to encourage them to take some personal control of their lives, and to provide them with a non-threatening classroom that will develop gratifying relationships for all who are involved.
Parental Expectations - Emotional Abuse

Trying to please parents can drain a person physically and emotionally. Jacoby (1984) reported the effects of emotional child abuse may be at least as devastating as those of physical abuse. Emotionally abused children suffer an even greater decline in mental and psychological development as they grow older than do physically abused children. Emotional abuse involves nothing less than the systematic destruction of a child's self-esteem. Emotional abuse is intangible. The wounds are internal. Emotional abuse differs from other forms of child abuse, because the victim may not realize he is being abused and the abuser may not recognize his abusive behavior (Dean, 1979). Emotional abusers are prompted not by a child's misbehavior, but by their own psychological problems. Nearly all of these abusers are unable to see that a child's behavior may not be related to anything the parent has done or failed to do.

Parents often have unrealistic expectations of a child's ability to achieve a particular grade. These expectations can produce anxiety in the child, which tends to have the opposite effect the parent desires (Leffingwell, 1979).

Parental expectations can cause emotional abuse. Emotional abuse as defined by Dreikurs (1964) consists of actions, either verbal or nonverbal, designed (consciously or subconsciously) to undermine the mental and psychological stability of the victim. The emotionally abused
individual is often left with feelings of worthlessness, inferiority, and inadequacy. In short, the victim often fosters the self-image of an inept human being. Dean (1979) defined emotional abuse as a chronic attitude or act on the part of a parent or caretaker that is detrimental to, or prevents the development of, a positive self-image in the child.

To cope with these inferiority and inadequacy feelings, individuals embark upon a continuous striving for significance in the search for personal importance. We tend to overcompensate by seeking perfection, disparaging others, and working to obtain as much power and authority as possible (Craft 1981). This power search can lead a child into an environment which is very negative. No child can realize their full potential in this type of surrounding. They tend to incorporate the image in which they have been cast and live with all the negative feelings they have incorporated along the way. With these distortions of self, they may develop character and behavior problems or become individuals with self-doubt and internal anger.

In relationships with their children, parents can often indulge in behaviors that will be designed to enhance their self-worth. Parental anxieties and insecurities are direct contributors to emotional abuse. The too-responsible parent is often overconcerned with the children's behavior as a reflection of self and the opinions of others in meeting their own need for superiority. Parents through control, can make their children extremely vulnerable to stress, tension, fear and anxiety of emotional abuse (Clarke, 1978). These parents use the four D's of
emotional abuse: deprivation, distancing, depreciation, and domination (Lefer 1984 as cited in Jacoby 1984). Deprivation means that a parent will deprive the child of any necessary attachment. This results in distancing where a child receives no emotional rewards for curiosity, growth and accomplishment. As a result, the child becomes stagnant and unemotional. Depreciation is a steady stream of verbal abuse which discounts the child's achievements. This is especially true when a child falls short of perfection. The non-perfect behavior only extols depreciation of the child's self-worth. Normal behavior is seen as a deficiency on the part of the child, and a failure on the part of the parent. Domination occurs when a parent uses a variety of methods to stifle a child's natural curiosity. The protective parent denies the child happiness of self-sufficiency and the pride of individual accomplishment, so that the child never develops courage to do more than crawl through life. The dependency of the child serves to enhance the superiority and self-esteem of the parent (Craft 1981). These parents see children merely as extensions of themselves, rather than separate entities in their own right (Gordon, 1975).

The demands of our competitive society serve to increase the stresses of life. Allred (1975) suggested the more obsessed we become with "right" and the more we attempt to avoid our shortcomings, the less willing we are to accept the peace that comes with the realization that perfection is impossible. We will never be "better", no matter how many more skills or knowledge we acquire.
Everyone enjoys praise and approval. However, this is complicated by the fact that we feel our parents respond only to our achievements. Children are raised with the notion that once they make it, they will have to keep making it. We are expected to sustain our successes and many children are afraid to make the commitment to success. Parents need to reward demonstrations of strength instead of just focusing on weaknesses.

Elementary school children are at an age where their athletic prowess is highly prized and social evaluation is extremely important. This type of social evaluation by a parent can cause competitive stress in their child. Competitive stress occurs when a child feels that he will not be able to respond adequately to the performance demands of the competition, and therefore risks failure and negative evaluation of athletic competence (Martens, 1977: Scanlan and Passer, 1978). They will give a negative social evaluation which results in considerable threat to their self-esteem. This may cause negative emotion or anxiety because their experience has been personally threatening due to the unnecessary pressure put upon the child. The win at all costs syndrome only intensifies stress in children of elementary school age.
Divorce

When parents divorce their children pay a high price in emotional pain. Approximately 40% of all married adults will get divorced at least once. Nearly 25% of the children in our country are living with one parent who is divorced or separated or with a parent who has remarried after divorce (Allers, 1980).

Divorce is not a brief, isolated experience in the lives of most children. It involves a sudden shift from security to conflict. In addition, many parents have a hard time understanding their own feelings during a divorce. This lack of identification leaves their children in a quandry, not prepared to comprehend their feelings regarding the pending separation of parents. This impact and resulting period of readjustment can be painful and damaging. The trauma of divorce for most children is second only to death. Most children have a deep loss and feel they are vulnerable to forces beyond their control.

Crisis events place stress on children that often exceeds their ability to handle them. While no single event automatically produces a crisis, the loss of a significant person through divorce usually elicits a crisis reaction. Crisis can be handled either adaptively or maladaptively, and either type of resolution has important long-term implications.

Divorce usually goes through a series of stages. The first stage usually consists of anger and frustration. The second may be depression
or grief, followed by a stage of disorientation, leading finally to a stage of adjustment (Katz, 1984). Children demonstrate their reactions to divorce in numerous ways. Each child's response will vary according to his or her unique personality, available support systems, and developmental level (Anthony, 1974; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1978). A lot may depend on the previous relationship the child had with the parent from whom the child is about to be separated.

There may be a difference in reaction to divorce between boys and girls. Part of the reason might be in that children of divorce tend to live with their mothers instead of their fathers. Hetherington (1973) suggested that the effects of the fathers' absence on boys tend to appear early and decrease with age, while the effects on girls remain later until adolescence. Hetherington also found that girls whose fathers were absent because of divorce exhibited tension and were inappropriately assertive, seductive, and sometimes promiscuous with men. While boys and girls react differently to divorce, both need help in readjusting.

Katz (1984) reported loss and grief is often expressed as anger, or regression to babyish behavior. Some children may appear unaffected. They may be suffering deeply and may not express pain until a later stage. One of the most powerful fears harbored by children of divorce is that they will be deserted and abandoned by one or both parents (Grollman, 1969). Turrow (1978) points out the fears of being abandoned creates in the child feelings of rejection and consequently a sense of being unloved.
Children often face the belief that they are the cause of the separation. Children feel guilty about the divorce because in their experience most of the bad things that happen occur because they were naughty (Cook, McBride, 1982). The divorce must be a retribution for wrongdoings (Grollman, 1969).

Changes in school performance often occur during the adjustment phase. Kurdek and Siesky (1979) found a decrease in school performance for children who were having adjustment problems due to the divorce. Further documentation of a decline in school performance by children of divorce is provided by Kelly and Wallerstein, (1976) and Wallerstein and Kelly, (1976). Children of divorce often show changes in school behavior, especially acting-out behavior (Canter, 1977). Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found an increase in the number and intensity of power struggles of adolescents with adults, in sexual behavior, and in the use of drugs and alcohol.

Children of divorce often exhibit specific kinds of behavior. These include absentmindedness, nervousness, weariness, moodiness, withdrawal, declining grades, acting-out, physical complaints (Allers, 1980).

Counselors cannot halt the increasing divorce rate, nor can they protect from pain the millions of children who are affected by divorce. But counselors can help children accept the reality of divorce and help them make for themselves the most satisfying lives as possible.
Body Disfunctions Related to Stress

Stress can lead to the development of numerous types of ailments. The body has an inherent defensive system which has the ability to adapt to a variety of stressful experiences. Even with this defensive system, the body has its limits, beyond which breakdown and illnesses occur.

Estimates of the percentages of people suffering from diseases that are stress-compounded range as high as 85% (Albrecht, 1979). Dunbar (1954) and McQuade and Aikman (1974) found that stress caused ulcers, headaches, backaches, anxiety, and colitis. In addition, Dunbar (1954) found symptoms of muscle tension, insomnia, increased fatigue, boredom, depression, listlessness, dullness or lack of interest in life's activities, excess drinking, eating disorders, diarrhea, cramps, gas, constipation, heart problems, phobias, tics, restlessness, and loss of humor. There has been an increased level of occurrence in heart disease, stroke, and liver and kidney failure. Elevated blood pressure levels have been found in 10.5% of 15 to 19 year-olds (Swartz and Leicht, 1975). Barrow and Prosen (1981) reported that stress is a direct link to thyroid malfunction, rheumatoid arthritis, and asthma. Migraine and tension headaches are also stress related.

A continuation of stress can lead to an exhaustion of the body's energy and resistance capabilities.

Stress can make children less productive. It can do so by disrupting the thought processes, or indirectly by producing fatigue and disease.
The mental state related to high levels of stress is not conducive to the type of rational, systematic thought demand in mental tasks (Barrow and Prosen, 1981). Wine (1971) discovered highly test anxious students experience disruption of task-focused thinking.

Another major problem of stress is the way individuals reduce their stress. Certain stress-reduction methods are damaging in health and productivity if used improperly. Examples include smoking, drug-use, alcohol and overeating.

Counselor Interventions

Since stress has serious ramifications for health and learning interventions the elementary school counselor can be a positive facilitative element. Identifying effective coping strategies to use with each child is based on an effective relationship between the child and the counselor. Effective coping can be understood only from the individual's frame of reference. Counselors study the coping processes used by each person to determine what is effective and what is ineffective. A coping response that is effective for one person may be ineffective for another. A coping response that works for a person in one situation may not work for in other situations (Stensrud & Stensrud, 1983).

Caplan (1964) differentiated between three types of preventive approaches. Primary prevention intends to reduce the incidence or number
of new cases. Secondary prevention decreases the number of cases that have already occurred. Tertiary prevention has a goal of reducing the impairment that might result from a variety of stressors. Romano (1984) identifies several specific stress management techniques which include progressive relaxation training, diaphragmatic breathing, biofeedback training, assertiveness training, and time management.

One intervention can be time management. Teachers and children need to manage their time to avoid stressful situations. When individuals are pressed by time constraints they could suffer from irrational ideas. Self-management procedures such as anxiety management training (Suinn, 1976), self-control desensitization (Goldfried, 1971), and relaxation as self-control (Deffenbacher & Snyder, 1976) have been used by counselors to provide stressful clients with necessary coping skills. All of these methods train clients to recognize various physiological stressors and to use these stressors for the application of client-centered relaxation skills. Clients learn how to handle their stress, as well as, the wide range of potential future stressors.

Relaxation skills make up a second coping strategy. Sparks and Ingram (1979) use an imagery approach to relaxation. Another relaxation technique is Jacobson's Progressive Relaxation (1938). This method is a deep muscle relaxation approach. Relaxation can be controlled through the control of cognitive activity. The alternative meditative technique developed by Benson (1975) is an example. Stearn (1965) reported control
of one's breath through proper breathing techniques is a simple way to control tension and anxiety.

Relaxation training is also important to help children recognize their own internal areas of stress. A popular technique of sensory awareness training has been developed by Stevens (1971). Meichenbaum (1977) related that a person needs to learn to recognize internal cues of stress and identify them in order to execute the correct coping strategy.

Stress reduction groups can help reduce stress. A group can provide an individual with the capabilities to recognize and deal with their own stressors, which becomes a two-part process: identification of "stressors" and methods to either alleviate or manage them. Most groups are designed to share feelings and become more introspective to oneself. Discussion and sharing with others is effective. Physical involvement may also get rid of stress and anger. Counselors can help children with irrational mental processes and develop coping mechanisms that will help self-confidence and bring more rational train of thought. Ellis and Grieger (1977) have developed RET as a viable approach.

Meichenbaum (1977) developed a "stress inoculation" program. This program teaches children to understand their stress reactions. Then the counselor teaches behavioral or cognitive coping skills. The child goes through a rehearsal stage using the techniques learned.

A counseling intervention to stress reduction is training in problem-solving skills. Advocates of this type of training include D'Zurilla and Goldfried (1971) and Carkhuff (1973). According to Barrow
and Prosen (1981) a mental focus on problem solving is incompatible with the impulsive, distracted, overly personalized mental activity characteristic of stress.

Whatever method of intervention is decided on, the counselor must remember that stress is just part of a system. Barrow and Prosen (1981) related that each part of a system is interdependent upon the other parts. When the counselor works only to change one part of the system, the system will probably overcome the change and restore the stress to its original state. The battle against stress is likely to be more effective if intervention is given to several parts of the system. Lazarus (1976) reported stress reduction in clients is proportionate to the number of modalities looked at in intervention.

Conclusion

As economic and social pressure bear down with increasing force upon the family, a greater share of responsibility for the children's affective support may fall to other institutions. In many cases, the school - its teachers and counselors - is called on to fill the vacuum created by the breakdown of the family (Webb and VanDevere, 1982). Stress is an immediate problem for the elementary school child in that it hampers productivity in mental tasks, disrupts psychological equilibrium, and threatens health. As one grows older and must cope with a world exponentially growing in complexity, the degree to which self-management
skills and life styles are facilitative of stress reduction becomes even more crucial (Barrow and Prosen, 1981).

It is critical, therefore, that educators become knowledgeable of the effects of stress on children. Such awareness and willingness to provide the proper support will make the school setting more responsible to the stress brought about by various stressors. In this way, schools will continue to help children learn at the level of their highest potential.

This is especially true when counselors assist teachers to understand that ignoring stress in themselves as well as children will not make it go away. Counselors must assist teachers to see the necessity for helping themselves and children become aware of stressors, how to control these stressors, and most importantly, incorporate stress management techniques into their lives. By using an introspective method teachers can help preserve their self-esteem as well as their students.

Parents can maintain high standards for their children and yet give the positive feelings about themselves and their abilities. Even if children know they will never achieve the standards, they still feel good about themselves because they receive recognition for their achievements, know that they are loved, and are a source of pride to their parents. We as counselors need to ensure a healthy future by making children emotionally healthy.

Because school personnel and family members have a special commitment to youth, they play important roles in helping elementary school children find a measure of happiness in life. Many students need assistance in
unlearning inappropriate behaviors and reeducation in life-coping skills. They can be taught to react to stressful situations. Relaxing and worrying are incompatible. The energy that is dissipated through worrying about stressful events can be channeled into higher levels of performance, problem solving and more joyful living (Crowley, 1981).

This is especially critical because to ensure the future of our children will indeed insure our future.
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