

What is stress?

Stress is the way our bodies respond to the demands that are placed upon us by our environment, relationships, perceptions and interpretations of events and issues in our lives. Stress is part of everyday life, and we all experience and react to it in different ways.

Isn't stress bad for us?

We tend to think of stress as a bad thing, but a certain amount of it actually helps us feel alert, energized and interested in life.

We need to experience some stress to learn how to deal with it, and thus develop coping strategies.

Too much stress, however—particularly when we don't have any control over it—can interfere with our ability to respond to everyday challenges and cause problems in our relationships.

Unhealthy responses to stress can affect our happiness and success, our ability to bounce back after troubled times, our health, and ultimately our longevity.

How does stress work?

When stress occurs, the brain signals the body to get ready to meet the challenge by stimulating the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is the control centre for many bodily functions including muscle tension, breathing, blood pressure, heart rate, pupil dilation and temperature control. The stress response instantly activates the body either to gear up to flee from danger or stand and fight it.

Researchers believe humans developed the "flight or fight response" in prehistoric times, when the main threats to survival were physical and involved dealing with predators and hostile environments.

Fact

Well-functioning brain systems that respond to stress are essential to preserve life. However, a poorly-controlled response to stress can be damaging to health and well-being if activated too often or for too long.¹

Today the threats and challenges we face are often social and emotional rather than physical, but our bodies are still equipped with the flight or fight reaction.

There are three important hormones that are triggered by our stress response:

- **Adrenaline** is a fast-acting hormone that prepares the body for quick response. It releases chemicals that give an energy surge, sending extra strength to the muscles of the arms and legs, and increasing heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen content. Adrenaline acts quickly and is dissipated quickly.
- **Cortisol** is another hormone secreted by the adrenal glands in response to stress. It acts in conjunction with adrenaline to mobilize energy stores, but is longer-lasting and allows the body to remain alert for minutes, hours or even days. When stress continues and cortisol levels remain elevated, there can be long-term effects: the body and mind experience exhaustion, including a suppressed immune system, increased muscle tension and reduced concentration.
- In a stressful situation, the level of **dopamine** increases in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, and can interfere with its executive functions, such as planning, problem solving, focusing, reasoning and self-control.



How can we avoid stress-related harm?

Learning how to identify your own stress before it escalates or interferes with your health and happiness is the first step. Learning how to manage your stress in healthy ways is also key to avoiding harm to yourself and those around you who may be negatively affected by your stress.

Fact

Even mild stress floods the prefrontal cortex with the hormones dopamine and norepinephrine, impairing how the prefrontal cortex works and thus impairing executive functions.²



For more information on stress and ways to reduce or manage stress in your life, visit www.psychologyfoundation.org. Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org

References

1 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005). **Excessive stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain: Working Paper #3**. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/story/2009/05/04/mb-mental-health.html>

2 Diamond, A. (2010) **The Evidence Base for Improving School Outcomes by Addressing the Whole Child and by Addressing Skills and Attitudes, Not Just Content**. *Early Education and Development*.21(5),780–793

Stress refers to the way a young student's body responds to the demands that come from his or her environment and relationships with others. Known as "stressors," these demands can have a significant impact on how a child learns and behaves in school.

Types of stressors and what they might look like in the classroom

Normal stressors: Some stressors in a young student's life may take the form of "daily hassles" that are typically short-lived. Examples include having to separate from parents, adjusting to a new classroom schedule, meeting new people or feeling pressure to do well on a test. Some students may show their stress by crying or whining, withdrawing, or acting out for a brief period before settling down to do their school work. However, it is necessary to have some stress in order to develop effective ways to handle it.

Serious stressors: Other stressors may be more serious or last longer, such as having problems getting along with other students, often being hungry or tired, feeling uncomfortable performing in front of others, or having an overly busy schedule (school plus too many extracurricular activities).

A student may respond to too much stress by:

- complaining about head aches and stomachaches,
- being aggressive or even lashing out at other children,
- seeming confused or easily distracted,
- performing poorly or progressively worse in their school work, or
- other behaviours such as withdrawing, nail biting, etc.

Fact

Stress is a normal part of life and essential to a young student's learning and development. But too much stress for too long can be harmful or "toxic."

One of the critical ingredients that makes stress tolerable rather than toxic is the presence of supportive adults that help children learn to cope with and recover from difficult experiences.

Chronic stressors: Some young students may have serious stressors that last a long time. Examples of chronic stressors include parental conflict, separation or divorce, a serious illness or health condition, being bullied or harassed, or dealing with unrealistic expectations and demands (of one's own or from others including parents and teachers). Children faced with these and other chronic challenges may withdraw, act out or in other ways demonstrate difficulties in learning new skills, processing information, solving problems, and building and maintaining healthy relationships with other children.

Your role as a caring, supportive adult

Evidence shows that even students with very difficult or complex lives are able to bounce back or maintain balance in troubled times when they are supported by caring adults such as teachers, coaches and counselors.

You can play an important role simply by noticing and paying attention to your student's stress.

Feeling loved, cared about and listened to are essential elements that help buffer children from the impact of too much stress.

You can build on this by modeling healthy techniques for recognizing and addressing stress throughout your work day. By consciously demonstrating that you too experience stress and challenges but use certain techniques to help you get back on track, you can help your students learn valuable skills and coping strategies—such as meditation, deep breathing and positive self-talk—they may naturally apply during stressful times in their own lives.



Keep in mind

Difficult or annoying behaviour is what we notice in children because it is visible and often requires a response.

But it is important to look beyond the behaviour and understand that many things may be happening inside the child that are causing them to act that way.

Some children get labeled a “pain in the neck” or even a “bad kid.” But a child’s behaviour is simply their language for expressing how they are feeling. If they are throwing objects or disrupting other students, they may be responding to something in their home life or elsewhere that is causing them stress. You can also help your students by teaching lessons on techniques for identifying or reducing stress, such as deep-breathing and meditation exercises.

Or you could embrace stress reduction and management fully by incorporating stress-related information and techniques into your regular school day. (See Kids Have Stress Too! Ideas for Classrooms Grades 1 – 3.)



Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org

Self-regulation is our ability to manage our feelings, thoughts and actions in ways that meet both our needs and the demands of our environment. Self-regulation helps children manage and modify their emotions and behaviour, focus and shift their attention, get along with peers and adults, plan and pursue goals, and eventually, to exhibit the qualities we think of as self-control and self-discipline.

As infants, we are regulated by our parents or other caring adults because we are helpless in meeting our own needs. But as we develop into young children, most of us learn—from others and through practice—how to pay attention, organize information and thoughts, deal with frustration or distractions, and perform other “executive functions” that help us learn new things, get along with others and reach our full potential.

Self-regulation in the classroom

Self-regulation is increasingly seen by educators as key to a student’s academic achievement and social success (unlike in the past when IQ was seen as the most important factor). This is because children who do not develop the capacity for self-regulation tend to have problems in their early school years. They may struggle with tantrums, impulsive behaviors, and sleep and diet issues.

They may be hypersensitive to transitions, and may overreact to minor challenges or stressors. They may also be inattentive or physically hyperactive.

Poor self-regulation not only impedes a child’s ability to attend to her lessons but may also undermine the teacher-student relationship. Not surprisingly, teachers respond much more positively to children who are able to stay calmly focused. Those who have more difficulty in this regard often receive less attention or are treated less sympathetically.

Fortunately, the classroom setting itself can help to steady children with emotional or behavioural challenges. By providing them with the structure and predictability they need, students learn how to better express and control their emotions and thoughts.

Fact

By age five or so, children are usually able to recognize what is upsetting them and express feelings with simple words such as “mad” or “sad.” By age eight or nine, children are able to describe their feelings in more detail, especially if they have been encouraged to be expressive and put feelings into words.

Promoting self-regulation through self-awareness and empathy

A big part of knowing who we are starts with being more aware of our feelings and the things that cause us stress or anxiety. Helping children develop emotional self-awareness is critical because it forms the basis of self-regulation.

Teachers can promote self-regulation by teaching their students how to recognize their emotions before they escalate. Students who can recognize, identify and talk about emotions are less likely to reach the point where they act out their strong emotions with disruptive behaviors. They are also better able to build healthy relationships with parents, peers and teachers.

Students who can empathize with others are better able to interpret others’ reactions to their emotions, helping them learn appropriate ways of expressing themselves. They also tend to be better at sharing with others, dealing with conflicts, and building and maintaining relationships.

Teachers can influence students’ understanding of themselves by discussing emotions during everyday interactions. Building understanding of emotion-related words can happen by intentionally teaching children to label both negative and positive emotions, and by helping them understand the causes of emotion.

Some students may need help to learn to regulate their negative emotions. Children who act out aggressively need to find ways to calm down and to cope. Severe aggressive behaviours, if left unchecked, can lead to disturbed behaviour in adolescence and beyond.

Fact

Children who are unable to recognize and express their feelings are more emotionally vulnerable and more susceptible to the influence of other peoples' emotions. They can also become more resentful when emotions stay bottled up inside.

Quick tips for promoting emotional awareness

Try to **see the world from your student's point of view** when he or she is struggling with an emotion

Encourage your students to talk about how they feel by listening without judgment or criticism and by helping them develop the vocabulary to express their feelings

When appropriate, **share** your own emotions with students

Keep in mind that students are learning about emotions by watching how you handle your feelings



Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org

References

- 1 Shanker, S. (2010) **Every Child, Every Opportunity: Curriculum and Pedagogy for the Early Learning Program.** http://www.ontario.ca/fr/initiatives/early_learning/ONT06_023398.html
- 2 Hincks-Dellcrest Centre. (2007). **Handle With Care: Strategies for promoting mental health of young children in community-based child care** (p 31).
- 3 Blair, K. A., Denham, S. A., Kochanoff, A., & Whipple, B. (2004). Playing it cool: Temperament, emotional regulation, and social behavior in preschoolers. **Journal of School Psychology, 42, 419-443.**

Helping your students develop resiliency

Fact Sheet # 4

“Resilience embraces the ability of the child to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity and trauma, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect.”¹

Resilience is the ability to cope with crisis and challenge, and the strength to turn the stresses of life into opportunities. There are many factors associated with resilience. Some of the more common aspects include individual factors, relationships, community, culture, physical environment and thinking styles.

Fact

An important body of research centres on what we “think” about stresses and adversity. Studies show that people who manage best under stress perceive themselves as capable of influencing certain aspects of their lives and so take action when faced with adversity. In addition, mistakes and change are viewed as opportunities for new learning and growth.²

Fact

“It is thinking style that determines resilience – more than genetics, more than intelligence, more than any other single factor.”⁴

Core competencies of resilience:

In the research on resiliency, the core competencies that are identified as necessary to build resilience are the same ones that are useful in learning to manage stress.

These core competencies include³:

Emotional regulation: The ability to stay calm under pressure and express emotions in a way that helps the situation

Impulse control: The ability to stop and choose whether to act on the desire to take action; the ability to delay gratification and persevere in the face of adversity

Causal analysis: The ability to analyze problems and accurately decide what the causes are

Empathy: The ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person

Realistic optimism: The ability to keep a positive outlook without denying reality

Self-efficacy: The belief that one has the ability to solve problems and handle stress, the ability to persevere Reaching out: The ability to take new opportunities and reach out to others.

Application to the classroom:

Some of the important skills that help people develop resiliency abilities can be learned, and introduced to children at an early age

A crucial part of enhancing resilience involves **increasing our own and student’s awareness** of the relationship between thinking and feeling

Understanding children’s thinking styles and beliefs is a key part of helping children build resilience and deal with stress. Teachers have an important role to play in supporting the development of resilience because of their day-to-day contact with young children and their parents. Their intensive contact places them in a unique position to influence the development of student’s thinking styles and emerging belief systems and thereby, their resilience.

Fact

“Resilience in children does not come from rare or extraordinary qualities, but from everyday, basic human resources such as relationships with competent and caring adults in the family and community, cognitive and self-regulation skills, positive views of oneself, and the motivation to effect the environment.”⁵

Tips to promote resilience:⁶

- **Thoughts and feelings matter:** It's important to understand student's beliefs and thinking styles and how they influence their emotional responses. Remember to ask about their thinking in addition to their feelings. Try using the phrase: "What are you saying to yourself in your head?"
- **Help students achieve a sense of "mastery,"** or being able to control outcomes by:
 - offering choices that give them appropriate control over their environment, (e.g., choosing books and activities during free time).
 - providing opportunities that challenge them within the scope of their abilities (e.g. working on a self-directed or group project).
- **Model resilient thinking:** Your students are watching and listening more closely than you think, even when you are not speaking directly to them. Model accurate and flexible thinking by "talking out loud" about your own struggles and encounters with daily stress: "Oops, I knocked over the paint. I'll get a cloth and clean it up." For more information on promoting resiliency and positive thinking styles, please see the excellent program "Reaching In, Reaching Out: Promoting resiliency skills in young children" (www.reachinginreachingout.com).
- **Praise for effort, not just achievement:** The way children are praised as well as what they are praised for makes a significant difference in how they learn to respond when faced with challenges or perceived failures. Research has shown that children who are praised for effort and hard work begin to value learning opportunities, whereas children who are praised for their abilities (or personal characteristics such as intelligence) tend to value performance. This sets them up for disappointment and helplessness when they don't perform as well. While they need your encouragement and love it when you recognize their accomplishments, make sure to emphasize and reinforce their effort and persistence, not just the end result. Effort and persistence will lead to successful outcomes.
- **Demonstrate calming and focusing:** Teachers can model and talk about strategies that help them calm down, refocus their attention and put things into perspective. Examples include: taking deep breaths and counting out loud, changing the environment by turning off some lights or putting on quiet music, stretching, or choosing a quiet activity.

Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org

References

- 1 Brooks, R. & Goldstein, S. (2001). **Raising Resilient Children**. New York, NY: Contemporary Books.
- 2 Kobasa, S.C. (1979a). Personality and resistance to illness. **American Journal of Community Psychology**, 7, 413-423;
- Kobasa, S. C. (1979b). Stressful life events, personality and health: an inquiry into hardiness. **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**, 37, 1-11.
- 3 Reivich, K. & Shatté, A. (2002). **The Resilience Factor**. New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- 4 Brooks, R. & Goldstein, S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. **American Psychologist**, 56(3), 227-238.
- 5 Adapted from **Reaching in reaching out**, available at www.reachinginreachingout.com
- 6 Strain, P. S. & Joseph, G. E. (2004). A not so good job with 'good job': A response to Kohn 2001. **Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions**, 6(4).

What is stress?

Stress can be defined as the way our bodies respond to the demands we face. These demands can come from the environment, and from our relationships with others. How we perceive or interpret these demands will determine just how stressful they are to us. Known as “stressors,” these demands can have an impact on our teaching abilities and relationships with students (not to mention our relationships with parents and co-workers). Additionally, the way we respond to stress in the classroom can influence the way our students respond to their own daily challenges, as they use us as their role models.

Types of stressors and how they might manifest themselves in the classroom

Teaching is a helping profession that involves a great deal of personal interaction, multi-tasking and continual change—changing subjects, changing gears to adjust to class speed, changing approaches to accommodate different learning styles, and playing multiple roles within a school.

By its very nature, teaching is a stressful and sometimes exhausting occupation. It is no surprise, then, that even teachers who typically thrive in face of daily challenges can sometimes be negatively affected by them. Teachers may become sharp and impatient with students or co-workers. They may be quicker to lose their temper in class. They may even take personally things that students, parents or others say or do, rather than try to understand what is truly behind their words and behaviours.

Some teachers can become overwhelmed by the weight of their responsibilities. In a 2006 study of Canadian elementary schools, 15–45% of teachers reported feelings of excessive stress and burnout. Some of the broader and more chronic causes of teacher stress include:

- increasing workloads,
- extensive unpaid overtime,
- swelling class-sizes, and
- increasing numbers of special needs students.

In addition, a teacher, like everyone else, may also have personal issues—divorce, debt, a difficult relationship with a child—that weighs heavily on their mind during their work day.

In the classroom, the signs of excessive stress may appear in the form of presenteeism (being physically present but not performing well due to a loss of interest in teaching, an inability to concentrate or stay organized, or feeling depressed or ill). Teachers may also express their stress through absenteeism (calling in sick more often and for longer periods). They may even consider leaving the profession altogether.

Did you know

According to a 2005 survey: • 83% of Canadian teachers reported having a higher workload than in 2001, with 58% indicating a substantial increase in the amount of work • Teachers reported working an average of 55.6 hours a week compared to 51.8% in 2001.¹



Your role as your own caregiver

Since excessive stress over an extended period of time can lead to health, relationship and other problems (including eating, sleeping and substance use problems), it is important for teachers to find way to manage their stress effectively.

Know thyself. You know yourself better than anyone.

If you know you are the kind of person who tends to take on more than they can handle well, you might want to hold back on your degree of volunteerism at your school and elsewhere. (Teachers tend to volunteer more than those in other professions. Many teachers also participate in workshops and courses.)

Learn to recognize when you are under too much stress. That way you can take steps to address your stress before it becomes a problem for you or for your students.

Seek peace. According to the World Health Organization's Charter for Health Promotion, peace is a prerequisite for health. Finding peace through meditation, exercise, music or spending time with friends can help you stay balanced.

Steer clear of second-hand stress. Do what you can to avoid taking on other people's stress, even if it means spending less time with people you like for a while.

Incorporate stress management techniques such as meditation and brisk-walking into your work day.

Embrace stress reduction by incorporating stress-related information and techniques into your school lessons and activities. (See Kids Have Stress Too! Ideas for Classrooms Grades 1 – 3.)



Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org

References

1 Smaller, H., Tarc, P., Antonelli, F. Clark, R., Hart, D. & Livingstone, D. (2005). **Canadian Teachers' Learning Practices and Workload Issues: Results from a National Teacher Survey and Follow-Up Focus Groups.** Paper presented at the annual conference of the Research Network on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL)

Teachers and parents are partners in helping children develop. They are also allies in addressing children's stress so they can concentrate on and enjoy learning.

But as in any complex-but-important relationship, tensions and emotions can run high between teachers and parents, particularly if they fail to bring compassion and a collaborative spirit into their interactions or lose sight of their shared goal - the health and happiness of children.

Teachers and parents who make time to share information and discuss a child's experiences are better able to provide the support a child may need. This is especially important when a child is experiencing significant changes at home or school, such as parental divorce or remarriage, or changing schools, grades and/or teachers.

Fortunately, resources abound on ways to improve parent-teacher conferences or better engage parents in school activities. What is often missing, though, is discussion on what may lie behind an uncomfortable relationship between teachers and parents

Why mutual compassion and respect are key

Most parents would agree that their child's teacher plays a significant role in their child's life.

Indeed some children spend more hours in a week in the care of their teacher than with a parent.

It is important for teachers to recognize that this can be hard on both the child and the parent, especially if there is nothing immediate the parent can do to relieve the situation. For example, if a parent is struggling with a serious illness or an economic problem, there may not be much they can do to engage with their child the way they would like. Add to this a language barrier, learning disability or behaviour issue and some parents may feel "underqualified" or even helpless and may react in unhelpful or inconsistent ways.

While sometimes teachers bear the brunt of parents' frustrations with their own situations, it is also true that some parents have legitimate frustrations with their child's school or the school system itself. For example, sometimes parents do not feel heard or sufficiently included in decisions about their child's education, and they may express their frustration with anger or apathy toward the school.

Fast facts about Canadian Families

In 2006, of families with children,

- 62.9% were married couples with children
- 11.3% were common-law couples with children
- 25.8% were lone parents with children

An increase in stepfamilies has changed the composition of Canadian families, with various mixes of step-parents, stepchildren, stepsiblings and half siblings.

In 2001, there were more than half a million stepfamilies in Canada, 40% of which were blended families (some or all children are from previous relationships of both parents).

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
<http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=37>

Yet this may only perpetuate a cycle of tension or, worse, disconnection.

Some parents may have had uncomfortable or unhappy times with their own school experience. This can make it difficult for them to participate meaningfully with a teacher's or school's expectations.

Seeing the bigger picture

Both teachers and parents need to realize that “we’re all in this together.” It is everyone’s responsibility to create healthy, safe and supportive environments for the children in a community.

Teachers are encouraged to embrace the bigger picture, even if the parents they work with are seemingly uncooperative. It is more effective to work from the premise that the parent may be overwhelmed, and therefore not able or ready to address all of a child’s needs. It is important that that as a teacher, you don’t blame or dismiss the parent. In cases where a parent is struggling, it is especially important for you to put 100% into your role as teacher and caring adult.

It can also help to remember that a parent is a child’s first “teacher.” Parents can provide teachers with a great deal of information about their child’s temperament. Sometimes a parent’s description of his or her child will be different from how the teacher perceives the child. For this reason alone it is worth putting effort in building and maintaining a parent-teacher partnership, as doing so can help make transitions and struggles at home or school easier and less stressful for everyone.

Helping parents

Some parents may want information or advice on how to ensure their child succeeds in school. They may need resources to help them understand more about early childhood education. Or they may need help in assisting their children in developing skills in certain subjects.

You can help parents by finding out what is frustrating them in their “parent as partner” role and giving them tips, strategies and referrals that can help them help their child.

Helping yourself

You can also benefit from information and tips on managing stress in your classroom and beyond.

For more information and resources related to work/life balance, and stress management, please visit www.psychologyfoundation.org



Kids Have Stress Too! Activities for Classrooms (Grades 1 – 3) features a series of fact sheets and tip sheets aimed at supporting teachers in implementing the program. For more information, please visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org