

# Of Interest

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### Stressed Out Kids

by Liz Ashe

Recently, a woman told me she felt like a **taxi** service. She said, “Not only do I to transport my daughter (age 10) to and from all her after school activities, my evenings and Saturdays revolve around dance lessons, gymnastics, swim lessons, piano lessons, and “Y” sports.”

I honestly didn't feel empathy for her. All I could think of was all the stress on her “over-scheduled” child and the possible “over-achiever programming” that may result. Her daughter probably needs a Day Timer to keep track of all her activities. I couldn't help but wonder how homework fits into the mix.

I asked the woman, “What is the reason you have her in so many programs?” She said, “I want her to be well-rounded and have a chance to experience the things I never had a chance to when I was her age. I also don't want her missing out on things other kids are getting.”

I suppose she means well and I see her “opportunity” reasoning. As a child, I was never exposed to organized sports until Jr. High and we never took swimming and gymnastic lessons as toddlers. Children today definitely are afforded more opportunities at an earlier age.

I can see the benefits of them singularly as social activities foster social skill development, sportsmanship and camaraderie, but when so many things get put on one child; I have a sense of dread.

When my son Shane was 9, we talked about grades. I asked him if he wanted to be an all A student. He said, “Nah, I couldn't stand all the stress! Some girls in my class cry when they get a B.” I remember thinking that he was wise not to be stressed over grades, but I took pause when I thought of 9 year-olds crying because of a B.

In Junior High, Shane was taking Tae Kwon Do and he also made the school basketball team. He went to practice after school, came home to eat, and we rushed off to Tae Kwon Do. After two weeks, he said, “ I can't do all this and find time to study. I have to give up Tae Kwon Do.” Again wise before his time.

Not all children or parents will be this wise or will they see an association with too many activities, over-scheduling and stress. Kids may really enjoy doing all the activities or possibly they may be doing it all to please their parents or to “keep up with their friends.” But child and development experts and educators agree that stress is mounting in our kids. Stress symptoms are showing up in kids as young as three and four years old.

### STRESS SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

*Be concerned if any of the following symptoms persist (for more than two weeks) or happen above and beyond the norm.*

- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares or night terrors or sleeping too much
- Refusal to eat, overeating or eating disorders
- Moodiness, crying, acting sad all the time
- Recurring physical ailments; headaches, stomach aches, nausea, intestinal problems
- Restlessness or irritability
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Nail biting, teeth grinding, hair pulling or twirling, fist clenching, self-inflicted injuries
- Acting out of anger or aggression; rage
- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Difficulties getting along with friends
- Negative changes in grooming habits
- Inability to focus
- Lack of interest in otherwise enjoyable activities
- Lying, stealing, forgetting or refusing to do chores
- Evidence of substance use or abuse

*Younger children may show any of the above symptoms but also:*

- Regressing to baby-like behavior
- Bed-wetting
- Much more clingy and dependent or fearful
- Tantrums
- Sudden or extreme shyness

*NOTE: Multiple stressors interact with one another and can have cumulative effects.*

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I teach Stress Management programs for adults but I'm starting to think avoiding stress in children is a mistake. To support my theory I Googled "Stress and Children" on the Internet. I was astounded at the number of articles or books written, television specials or shows, or Health Newsletters and Web articles about the subject. I typed in Teen Stress and Teen Suicide and the listings skyrocketed.

## WHY ARE KIDS SO STRESSED OUT TODAY?

There are probably many reasons but let's face it; kids live in the same hectic world we do. Current affairs, terrorists, fears about the war, particularly if a parent is serving, school shootings, national disasters or economy issues can take a toll on kids just as they do adults. The media is filled with negative news and there is more worry about gangs, violence, sexual abuse and kidnapping than ever before.

**Osmosis:** It's unrealistic to think kids don't sense or absorb what we are feeling or going through. Working adults are asked to do more with less, are getting laid off, have financial worries and experience any number of other stressors. It isn't always easy to disguise our stress, frustrations, concerns or difficulties. Some adults may even take out their stress on their kids by yelling or worse.

**Pressure to achieve:** Children, at younger and younger ages, are pushed to excel in schoolwork, athletics and socially. Children who don't go to preschool or to a day-care with organized learning will be behind when they enter Kindergarten.

**Peer Pressure:** Kids today face tough choices about drugs, smoking, drinking, and sex much early than their parents did.

**Over-programming:** Activities, no matter how worthwhile singly, cumulatively, can be disastrous. Multitasking may be a way of life for children today, but what is this doing to the concept of relaxation?

**Floundering families:** As divorce rates skyrocket, there are more single-parent families than ever before placing a heavy burden on overextended parents and their children. Then there is the matter of coordinating visits with each parent, and if there is resentment and discord from the break-up, tension often gets transferred directly or indirectly to the children. They may be asked to choose sides or get in the middle.

**Lack of Downtime and Family Time:** Don't underestimate the value of downtime for you and your kids. The more activities, the less time together. Attempt to have more Family meals.

**Individuation (finding a sense of self), social, biological and hormonal changes, peer review and trying to fit in is stressful for teens. It is worse if they are ostracized, teased or tormented.**

**If you need help or more information on this topic,  
your EAP is here for you.**

## PARENTS CAN HELP WITH KIDS' STRESS

**Educate Yourself:** Libraries or sites such as Amazon.com have many books for children and parents on Stress. Check the Internet, ask your health care provider or call your EAP.

**Tune in:** Listen to your child's worries, fears or complaints. Do not minimize or dismiss them. Watch for the signs and symptoms of anxiety, depression or stress. Talk to their teachers.

**Evaluate:** Try to figure out what could be causing their stress. Are they over-scheduled? Is there a bully at school? Have they gone through a lot of change? Are you burdening them with all your problems? Are you over-expecting? Do they need problem solving skills? Is school too tough?

**Eliminate:** Try to determine what stressors can be dealt with. Help kids prioritize activities and to let some go. Tell them they don't have to be perfect. Allow for mistakes. Give them bully-proofing strategies. Hire a tutor to help with homework.

**Learn then Teach, Stress-Busting Techniques:** Positive self-talk, Breathing exercises, Yoga, Meditation, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Visualization, Stretching, Exercise, Singing, Dancing, Up-lifting or calming music, and lots of humor and laughter.

**Take care of yourself:** Set a positive example. Dr. Michele Borba, internationally known parenting expert said on the Today Show (Nov. 13, 2007), "The truth is, happier less stressed parents make happier, less-stressed kids. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your kids. Instead of fretting about never having time for yourself, why not practice stress busters as a family. Not only will the kids learn them, but you'll be more relaxed too."

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