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Childhood stress

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Abstract

Stress has been recognized as a major source of potential physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems in both adults and children (Forman & O'Malley, 1984). Selye (1956) has pointed out that a certain amount of stress is an inevitable part of living, but excessive stress can have damaging consequences. It calls forth emotional reactions and can lead to marked changes in attitude and behavior. Selye (1974) has defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it." (p. 27) These demands which he labeled stressors may arise from either pleasant or unpleasant stimuli or situations. Almost anything can become a stressor, providing it is of sufficient duration, frequency, or intensity. Thus, any major change can lead to stress, which is essentially the disruption of homeostasis or balance within the body (Barrow & Prosen, 1981).

CHILDHOOD STRESS

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Theresa Klostermann Prier

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Stress has been recognized as a major source of potential physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems in both adults and children (Forman & O'Malley, 1984). Selye (1956) has pointed out that a certain amount of stress is an inevitable part of living, but excessive stress can have damaging consequences. It calls forth emotional reactions and can lead to marked changes in attitude and behavior.

Selye (1974) has defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it." (p. 27) These demands which he labeled stressors may arise from either pleasant or unpleasant stimuli or situations. Almost anything can become a stressor, providing it is of sufficient duration, frequency, or intensity. Thus, any major change can lead to stress, which is essentially the disruption of homeostasis or balance within the body (Barrow & Prosen, 1981).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the conditions that produce childhood psychological stress, list signs of stress in children, examine children's responses to stress, and discuss intervention strategies to help children cope with stress.

Conditions That Produce Childhood Psychological Stress

In order to examine signs of childhood stress, children's responses to stress, and intervention strategies to help children cope with stress it is important to explore the conditions that produce childhood psychological stress. Psychological stress arises from two main conditions: failure of the environment to meet the needs of the individual, and environmental demands (Chandler, 1981).

Failure of the Environment to Meet the Needs of the Individual

Some examples of environmental imbalances include: parents in the home setting, peers at school, the noise level, and the lack of privacy. Most of these environmental experiences for children take place in three major environmental contexts: home, school, and the community. Stress can be thought of in terms of the context such as the school classroom or the neighborhood, in which demands take place, in which resources exist, and in which responses occur (Thoreson & Eagleston, 1983).

Stress is often experienced in children when people that have a significant impact on their lives fail to meet their needs. Children are sensitive and quite aware of

the environmental stresses they encounter. Studies of developmental psychopathology suggest that the childhood latency period (the elementary school years) may entail emotional vulnerabilities as extensive, if not more so, than adolescence (Coleman, 1978; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1981).

As dispersing economic and social strains increasingly fall upon the family, responsibility is placed on the children who in return may seek out support from various institutions. In many cases the local school - its teachers and counselors are called to fill in the vacuum created by the breakdown in the primary socialization unit - the family (Webb & Van Devere, 1984).

There are early maladaptive reactions in children who have experienced crisis. Children may be exasperated by a shift in family equilibrium as a result of a "separation" experience (Birtchnell, 1969). Caplan (1961) argued that serious consequences result from the individual's increased sensitivity to environmental events during such periods. If crisis leads either to positive or negative growth, as Caplan (1961) suggested, along with increased environmental sensitivity, effective techniques need to be developed to help children cope

with events as they occur. The challenge is to engineer early home and school experiences to produce crisis "resistant products" or at least those with well-developed crisis mastery skills (Forman & O'Malley, 1984).

Environmental change is a pervasive force in today's society. Toffler (1970) stated that change affects the individual in many ways. Rogers (1969) raised "the question of how much change the human being can accept, absorb, and assimilate and the rate at which he can take it." (p. 41). Children must adopt to a continual changingness, if they are to adequately cope with the stress involved.

Environmental Demands

A perceived imbalance between the demands a person faces and the resources believed to be available contributes to increased stress in children whether they encounter excessive demands, real or perceived, in their environment.

Living is stressful. Life presents an immense spectrum of demands requiring the child to react in a variety of ways. Whether a given demand causes stress depends on the person's calculations of the demand and an appraisal of the resources available to meet that

demand. Antronosky (1979) enumerated resources useful in balancing demands with responses: (a) Physical/biochemical resources (auto-immune system); (b) Material/physical resources (money, strength, shelter, clothing); (c) Cognitive/emotional resources (acquired knowledge, intellectual capacity, self-concept); (d) Orientation resources (anticipating and evaluating events, planning and preparing, tolerating frustration, flexibility, foresightedness, rationality); (e) Interpersonal and relational resources (number of close friends, commitment to others, social skills, assertiveness); and (f) Social and cultural resources (family background, religion, arts, mass media).

The key aspects concerning these demands, resources, and responses are reciprocal in interaction with each other. While some imbalance is often inevitable in life and in the frequent occurrences of the give and take of demands, stress is a state of persistent excess of these demands over resources. As counselors it is important to help children to develop and build these resources. The results will be increased knowledge and recognition of the situations and circumstances that create demands along with awareness of thoughts, beliefs, and values that are stress producing.

Signs of Stress in Children

Children experience stress just as adults do. When stress builds it tends to accumulate and this accumulation is linked to many signs of unresolved psychological pain. This psychological pain may be either physical or emotional in nature.

Physical Signs of Stress in Children

Honig (1986) identified the following as signs of stress in children: (a) Daydreams frequently; (b) Has grave, solemn face and rarely smiles or laughs; (c) Has frequent prolonged temper tantrums; (d) Act sullen, defiant (says "I don't care" frequently); (e) Is highly demanding of adults although usually fairly self-sufficient; (f) Is unable to carry out sustained play with peers; (g) Has constant need to sleep although physically well; (h) Is preoccupied with frightening images of monsters or other violent, threatening figures; (i) Has dull, vacant expressions, as if trying to ward off thinking about stressful trauma or tries to deny stressful feelings; (j) Is hyperactive or restless, wanders around room, touches and disturbs toys and games, cannot settle into constructive play; (k) Talks compulsively about physical dangers and threats; (l) Displays reduced attentional capacity; cannot focus

well on activity or request; (m) Frequently acts aggressively against others, even adults; (n) Has nightmares.

Webb & Van Devere (1984) defined unhappiness as a liable mood quality associated with dysphoria. Children display more doubtfulness regarding their own personal and intellectual abilities to meet expectations. Other adaptive difficulties among children are: tension and arousal, exhibition of preoccupied fretfulness about family relationships, expression of emulation as a form of competitive anxiousness regarding achievement, manifestation of stubbornness or strong-willed obdurateness, resentment toward others and toward self. (Webb & Van Devere, 1984).

Still other signs of physical stress in children are: (a) extremely harddriving, ambitious, competitive in work and play; (b) excessive time pressure and time urgency; and (c) very easily aroused impatience, irritability, anger, and hostility.

Negative Emotions and Related Behaviors

White & Phair (1986) described the following negative emotions as signals of stress: (a) Anger directed toward the parents, peers, self or significant

others, such as a child wondering how to handle expectations of parents and peers. Anger can eat away at personal satisfaction if an outlet is not found for it; (b) Sadness, sorrow, disappointment with self and the circumstances; (c) Overprotection, to exclude or restrict self from activities or services; (d) Guilt feelings of not being good enough, not working hard enough, or not spending enough time on tasks; (e) Denial by overlooking mild/moderate problems because of not understanding difficulties or how to cope with them. (f) Fear of the unknown; of personal inadequacy or inability to cope; (g) Defensiveness by blocking ideas from others. They tend to see suggestions as criticisms. (h) Jealousy and/or competition between parents, child, siblings. Often children are not getting credit for accomplishments; (i) Frustration or feelings of overwork can lead to defensiveness; (j) Exhaustion can lead to physical illness; (k) Fatalism, a feeling of overwhelming hopelessness. It's always a "no-win" situation. Frustrations, failures, setbacks, anxiety, and a host of similar feelings build to a point where the child is overwhelmed by hopeless perspectives of the concentration is on the future and things beyond their control.

Children's Responses to Stress

As a result of the ever-changing political situations of the world and the expansive range of our media coverage, it is reasonable to assume that things children fear today are quite different from fears of 10-20 years ago and the fears continue to encounter in the future (Moracco & Camilleri, 1983).

Freud (1977) defined fear as the attitude toward real dangers threatening from external sources. Fear is also defined as a mental or physical reaction to a danger or threat (Moracco & Camilleri, 1983).

Children's fears are often dismissed as a "passing stage" that will soon be outgrown. Research has shown that 83% of the fears initially expressed by children are still present a year later (Eme & Schmidt, 1978). Other studies show that many fears originating in childhood can persist through adulthood, continuously causing problems and difficulties (Jersild, 1968; Miller, Barrett, Hampe & Noble, 1972).

A great deal of support is necessary for children to overcome their fears. Fears are not just a passing stage. Fear of objects, people, or situations have a substantial impact on children.

Imitative fear behavior may increase or decrease depending on the parent's reaction to the child's expression of fear. It has been shown that acceptance, independence, and regard by parents result in a low frequency of fears in children, but rejection, dependence, and punishment result in a high frequency of fear (Sidana & Sinha, 1973).

Children who are facing a set of demands with inadequate support or resources may respond in many ways that are detrimental or maladaptive. "Miscoping" responses include social withdrawal, alcohol or drug abuse, and truancy. In the cognitive area, an imbalance of demands or resources result in feelings of low self-esteem and beliefs about being a failure (Thoreson & Eagleston, 1983). These negative beliefs are facilitated by negative self-talk, blame, accusation, and negative beliefs about self. "Learned helplessness" is the belief that one's actions essentially are unrelated to the consequences that are experienced (Seligman, 1975).

Responses to stress can be reduced or even prevented by anticipating stress and producing aspects of various situations. One admissible interpretation is that the child introjects the predominant behavior "modeled" for him during a given type of crisis, and

that this becomes a guiding framework for his later behavior and coping effects (Fellner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975). Children can be informed about how to assess and evaluate resources and the role their views play; how thoughts about their resources influence their reactions (Thoreson & Eagleston, 1983).

Stress Intervention Strategies

Murphy (1961) stated that crisis events place demands on individuals that exceed their ability to handle with normal resources. Effective crisis management can enhance a child's strengths and appropriate resources as inappropriate solutions may prompt maladjustment. Each solution may have long-term results. Through effective crisis management, counselors can help remedy the problems by helping the child view stress from a healthy perspective. Stress is affected by situational variables, therefore, stress can be moderated by perception and the effects of generalizations and discriminations of different reactions to the same or similar situations (Remer, 1984).

Children need to effectively learn the skills of coping with stress. Seeking help from a counselor is an appropriate way to gain the needed skills and knowledge.

The learning of effective coping skills can bring about change. Change should be approached on a trial basis. What works for one individual in one situation may not necessarily work for the same person in another situation.

The use of networking or social support can be effective. According to Remer (1984) networking equals the establishment and use of a social system for the exchange of information, support, and encouragement. The purpose of networking is making changes with input and support of others in order to overcome the fear of new behaviors or feelings that are fictiously associated with them and changing together instead of alone. It is important to seek out others who are involved in similar situations. Counselors can help children reduce stress through group process. Group process allows children to share common ideas, problems, and concerns along with providing encouragement, feedback, and advice. Networks can also provide a type of informal counseling for preventative and developmental rather than remedial emphasis (Remer, 1984).

A second intervention strategy oriented to stress reduction is the use of relaxation skills. Relaxation can be incorporated in a variety of ways: emotive

imagery, self-hypnosis, meditation, stress inoculation, biofeedback, or autogenic learning.

The teaching of effective communication skills is another commonly used yet crucial aspect of stress reduction. Reduced stress can be enhanced by appropriate interpersonal interactions. Children that are active listeners, assertive, who are empathic and have the ability to confront may increase the beneficial interpersonal interactions.

Cognitive restructuring, the ability to literally transform major demands into minor events, can aid in stress management (Thoreson & Eagleston 1983). Children are often overwhelmed with demands from the environment and from others. They often respond from an internal basis, by their self-talk. The encouragement of positive self-talk in stressful times is essential.

Learning to use decision-making and problem solving strategies is important to the long-lasting effectiveness of stress reduction. Brainstorming techniques, values clarification, and compartmentalizing are examples of strategies of this type.

According to Thoreson & Eagleston (1983) a popular method of studying stress has been to assess major life events; those situations that combine powerful demands

and often strong reactions in people, such as the divorce of one's parents, death of a close family member, major personal injury or illness, or changing to a new school.

Whatever method of intervention is utilized counselors continually need to increase their understanding of the pervasiveness of change in today's society and the personal stress in children that accompanies change. As Seyle (1974) pointed out individuals can learn to adopt attitudes that convert negative stress into positive stress, to set goals that alleviate a sense of purposelessness, and learn cooperation - a blend of egoism and altruism.

Conclusion

Stress is impossible to avoid. Everyday there are stressors and strains in the give and take of societal demands. We, as adults experience stress, and through awareness we may understand that children also experience stress to a high degree in their daily living.

Although coping with the stressors and strains of daily life builds individuality, responsibility, and encourages children to seek out help and support, too

much stress can be devastating, resulting in a number of unhealthy strategies for adjustment.

Children have little understanding of stress and the impact of stress on their lives. We, as adults, need to take the initiative to facilitate the assurance of children's future and their lives.

It is the author's view that little is being done to inform children about the multifaceted ways that stress affects their lives. Feelings and emotions, when suppressed or denied, can result in exhaustion, depression, and stress. These feelings and emotions can lead to "dead ends" if they are not dealt with openly and positively. There are constructive ways to channel our thinking and energies to better serve the children of today's society. As expressed by White & Phair (1986) we need to discipline ourselves, to fill in the gaps of our knowledge and request help and support when faced with a problem we do not understand.

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