

TO STRESS OR NOT TO STRESS, THAT IS THE QUESTION

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Suppose your childhood was filled with people telling you that you have great potential and the ability to become what ever you want. They say that there will be many opportunities awaiting you, because you were born smart. Oh, the pressure!

We tend to forget that the gifted child – that little bundle of curiosity, drive, and intensity – is a child first and gifted second. Although the propensity to push gifted children to excel is well entrenched, it is not always welcomed or wise. Just as children are taught to walk and talk, gifted children need to be taught the coping strategies necessary to recognize and handle the stresses placed on them when achieving milestones earlier than expected for their age. These stresses, it should be noted, come from internal as well as external sources – from the children themselves as well as from the adults around them.

It is natural to second-guess the choices that we make about when and how much to encourage children, versus when and how much to push them. Teachers, parents, and children all experience this constant balancing act that is likely to become mentally exhausting over time. This is particularly true when dealing with multiple children requiring the application of different strategies at the same time. There is no magic formula that can be applied to all children, all the time. What works today is not a guarantee of what will work tomorrow. Patience, however, will be an important skill for both teachers and parents in pursuit of their goals regarding when to encourage versus when to push. A skill that should be practiced in conjunction with teaching stress management strategies to gifted children. It is through practice that stress can be reduced and kept at bay. The better that gifted children understand their stressors, the more confident and empowered they feel and the more likely they will be to choose the appropriate strategies to combat their stressors.

Many questions arise when discussing the topic of stress. How do we recognize when gifted students are experiencing stress? Where do the stressors originate? Is learning to struggle an important part of their development? When should one consider the ability of children over their presumed potential? Why is it important to respect the emotional sensitivities of gifted children? Are there specific strategies that can be taught to better

handle stress? Be assured that all of these questions have been studied and answered by one or more of the experts mentioned below.

James Alvino, Richard Carlson, Carol Dweck, Natalie Madorsky Elman and Eileen Kennedy-Moore have all been major contributors to their respective fields of study: child development, stress management, motivation and personality psychology, and childhood social-emotional issues. These four authors have provided a wealth of valuable insights and strategies that teachers and parents can use to help children faced with various forms of stress. They collectively offer an exceptional way of seeing how certain ideas can be applied to the healthy development of gifted children.

What is stress?

Gifted children compete daily with myths surrounding giftedness, and this alone can be a great source of stress (Cross, 2002). Anything can be perceived as stressful if it is done long enough, often enough, or is considered boring enough (Kaplan, 1990). Leslie Kaplan, who wrote *Helping Gifted Students with Stress Management* (1990), emphasizes that stress is the body's way of responding to the physical, emotional, and mental demands created by one's self or others. She goes on further to explain that stress is not only brought on by negative factors, such as an assignment's deadline, but also by positive events, such as participating in a gifted program. Teachers and parents often forget or underestimate the stress that is experienced when gifted children place high expectations upon themselves. Even when things are going well, Kaplan points out, children often secretly fear that the next time they do something open to judgment, they may not live up to the expectations others hold for them – let alone their own high expectations. Having a relentless pressure to excel, such as when partaking in multiple activities, can take away the joy of participation (Kaplan, 1990). Unfortunately, in such situations, children are doing ... just to do.

Many gifted children feel different and/or feel that they need to prove their giftedness. Kaplan (1990) addresses these feelings. When separated from their peers, such as for enrichment pull-out programs, an internal conflict develops between belonging to their class and using their extraordinary abilities. Yet, for children who prefer thinking

and reasoning activities, they often will feel angry and resentful when bored or faced with doing monotonous busy-work (Kaplan, 1990). In a report entitled, *The Silent Epidemic* (2006), boredom is recognized as a legitimate form of stress. It leads to loneliness, and fewer opportunities to relieve stress, which in turn continues to cause more internal turmoil. Kaplan (1990) reminds us that stress often causes over-sensitivity to criticism, blurs thinking, decreases concentration, and weakens decision-making – all of which impedes the very same abilities that make these children gifted.

Alvino (1990) outlines four areas of stress common among gifted children: Achievement Anxiety, Perfectionism, Social Development Gap, and having Heightened Sensitivity to Adult Problems (Alvino, 1995). These four developmental and behavioral factors, when combined with Dweck's insights into a person's mindset (2006), and Elman and Kennedy-Moore's focus on social development (2003), produce a collective body of knowledge that enables you to appreciate, teach, and apply Carlson's stress management strategies (1997) in a whole new light. When linked together, you will see your gifted children blossom into more confident, less stressed children.

Achievement anxiety

Alvino (1995) believes that gifted children are at high risk of burnout because they have undeveloped coping patterns and lack stress management skills. These developmental and behavioral deficits amplify the stresses that gifted children encounter.

Achievement Anxiety, as described by Alvino (1995), is a "pressure caused by ambitious demands of others" (pg. 16) and can originate from one's self or from others. He goes on to explain that some gifted children have been given the message that life is about getting further ahead and living-to-achieve, rather than experiencing life through achievements and feeling fulfilled. Children tend to worry about maintaining certain levels of achievement and continue to worry about the greater expectations placed on themselves once they do achieve. Often, in a situation like this, a child would rather do the bare minimum than risk the look of disappointment due to their perceived failure.

Dweck is regarded as one of the world's leading researchers in the fields of personality, social psychology, and developmental psychology. Becoming familiar with her work gives one an insight into the importance of struggle, and the balance needed between a gifted child's ability, and the anxiety that can occur due to presumed achievement potential (Dweck, 2006). In her book *Mindset* (2006), Dweck addresses results of her study *The Danger of Praise*, which looks at the dangers of giving too much praise and the over-use of positive labeling. If our goal, as teachers and parents, is to encourage children when they need encouragement, then it is important to ensure that the messages of our encouragement are the ones that we really want our children to hear.

One of the questions Dweck explores is how to give children the confidence needed to try. In her study,

outlined in her book *Mindset* (2006, p.71), she involved hundreds of adolescent students in a three-part study. The first part required answering a set of ten reasonably difficult problems from a nonverbal IQ test. When finished, the students were praised in one of two ways: one group was praised for their ability (eg., "you must be smart"), while the second group was praised for their efforts (eg., "you must have worked hard"). Her research found that the ability-praised group believed that their success was due to being smart, whereas the effort-praised group believed that their efforts were what it took to succeed. In the second part of the study, both groups were given the choice to take on a new and difficult task. The ability-praised group declined because of the stress they felt from the potential exposure of any flaws that would call into question their intellect, whereas 90% of the effort-group students welcomed the opportunity to try the new, challenging task.

The third and final part of the study had both groups answer extremely difficult problems, and both groups struggled. The ability-group believed, based on their poor performance, that they were not smart after all. This group equated success with intelligence. The self-inflicted stress they were now experiencing was extreme. Their performance dropped even when given an easier set of questions. Comparatively, the effort-group simply thought that difficult questions meant more effort had to be applied and did not view their errors as failure or a reflection on their intelligence. There was a sense of enjoyment taking on such difficult problems – a way to hone their skills. When given a set of easier questions, this group's performance rate increased. What this study teaches is that using effort to further learning is crucial. Without understanding the importance of effort, anxiety over achievement continues to build. Knowing how to put forth effort is a skill that needs to be taught at a young age. The art of *try-and-try-again* is a crucial developmental skill, often not taught to those children who possess early, natural talents. Without learning the coping skills necessary to put forth effort and face struggle, the unnecessary build up of stress becomes inevitable.

Perfectionism

Many gifted children, Alvino (1995) observed, live "in a constant state of frustration" (p. 16). They are feeling stressed because they do not know how to try, or because something is not turning out the way they want it to. A gap may be felt between how children feel they are performing and their unrealistic "self-imposed achievement goals" (p. 16). Gifted children may become perfectionistic when approaching a new task because of self-imposed pressures regarding whether the choices being made are the right ones. Moreover, this is intensified for them because of the higher numbers of options available to gifted children.

Dr. Richard Carlson, who wrote, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and it's all small stuff" (1997), believed – like Zen philosophy teaches – that "...when you learn to let go of problems instead of resisting with all your might, your life will begin to flow" (p.4). The ability to take a step back and self-evaluate is a strategy that can be taught, and becomes important to teach to gifted children. Carlson also refers to a

well-known passage: “Change the things that can be changed, accept those that cannot, and have the wisdom to know the difference” (p. 5). This famous passage is known as the Serenity Prayer. If we change “*have* the wisdom” to “*learn* the wisdom,” then it becomes even more appropriate to teach to gifted children, a motto of sorts. Is this not what we are hoping gifted children will learn? If “learn the wisdom to know the difference” can be realized, then we will be teaching a strategy necessary to know how and when to rebound from a path leading towards self-inflicted stress.

Social development gap

For gifted children, being of a young chronological age generally brings about intellectual interests and abilities typical to those of older children (Alvino, 1995). Their same-aged average ability peers do not typically share these intellectual interests and abilities. Both Alvino (1995), and Elman and Kennedy-Moore (2003) agree that being socially isolated is going to be a source of stress. Social rejection, when felt repeatedly, causes children to see themselves as unlikable playmates (Elman, Kennedy-Moore, 2003).

In the book, *The Unwritten Rules of Friendship* (Elman, Kennedy-Moore, 2003), nine areas of social strength and difficulties often felt by all children are identified. They write that most children will experience social difficulties at one time or another in their lives. Gifted children, however, differ. They may show an ability to list the steps involved to problem-solve social situations, yet may lack the tools necessary to implement those steps. This book recognizes that socialization is not about instant answers or measurable results, which is a common way gifted children think. Instead, there is a “social maze” (p. 8) needing navigation without a clear finish line. It is important to remember that social cues do not always come naturally, but can be taught.

Heightened sensitivity to adult problems

Gifted children seem to have an earlier than expected understanding of time, routines, and order. To them, the world that they understand and relate to is generally limited to home, play-based activities, and possibly pre-school. Yet, as they get older, their need to know what is going on in their world begins to expand to a world beyond their protected front door. Their focus shifts to wanting or really needing to know what is happening around them. Alvino (1995) describes these gifted children as those who tend to “worry about problems that do not affect them directly, or, over which they have no control” (p. 17). They become “info-maniacs” (p.17) about worldly events. Such things could include certain global issues that, although caused by adults, still intrinsically bother the mature and knowledgeable child. Today, information is not difficult to come by in our need-to-know-now world. The internet era provides adults with instant, real-time news that is difficult to shelter from children. It is, however, still important to empower children to make small changes to their world, such as organizing a clothing drive, without feeling as if they are putting the weight of solving worldly problems on their shoulders.

Stress management strategies

It is the responsibility of teachers and parents to help gifted children appreciate being children. This does not mean ignoring their gifts and talents. Rather, it means recognizing the additional need to teach them specific strategies to reduce the stresses that come into their lives earlier than they may be prepared for. As a stressor must first be recognized before it can be dealt with, the primary approach to coping with stress becomes determining the source of that stress. Thereafter, targeted stress-reduction strategies can be developed and taught.

Dr. Carlson (1997) wrote in his chapter *Make Peace with Imperfections* (chap. 2, p. 9), that he had never met an absolute perfectionist who felt at peace with himself. He believed that when you focus on the imperfections, it pulls us away from the goals we hope to achieve. “It’s about realizing that while there’s always a better way to do something, this does not mean you can’t enjoy and appreciate the way things already are” (p. 9). It is for this reason that I found his book to be an excellent resource for parents to use with their children who experience stress. Although his book may have been written for adults, his message and strategies have proven invaluable to those of any age. After reading this book, the importance of teaching stress-coping strategies early in a gifted child’s life, becomes apparent.

Further, Carlson (1997) emphasizes that stress tends to get out-of-hand and, therefore, the need to *Lower your Tolerance to Stress* (chap. 19, p.53) becomes an important step in taking control over one’s life. There is a common belief that the more stress we can handle, the better off we will be. But why? What is the attraction to carrying a larger basket of rocks when we can carry a smaller basket of gems? By noticing stress early, one can avoid having it get “out-of-hand” (p. 54). Carlson writes that when we notice our minds moving too quickly and anxiety starting to set in, we need to recognize this and take a step back to regain our bearings. By identifying a problem when it is still small and manageable, it will be easier to control. We know that when stress gathers momentum, it can prove difficult, if not impossible, to stop. Maintaining a stress free mental state, allows one to be more effective in both work and play.

When anxieties persist, “negative and insecure thinking can spiral out of control” (Carlson, 1997, p. 13). This is when being *Aware of the Snowball Effect of Your Thinking* becomes an important strategy (chap. 4, p. 13). Carlson pointed out that the more absorbed you get in the details, the heavier the weight you will feel. How is it possible to feel at peace if your mind is always full of concerns and annoyances? Encouraging children to write down their concerns and annoyances allows a sort of “cleaning of the slate.” This strategy unburdens your mind by acknowledging stressful feelings without ignoring them. When written down, feelings hold value without holding mental space. Being able to visually lay out the path of a stressful problem from beginning to end enables you to see thinking patterns in reverse. This allows you to trace such problems back to when they began to get out of hand.

Life continues to encourage us, Carlson (1997) believed, to do the best we can with what we have, even if life does not seem to be fair. During our lives, we build up our resources through failure and struggle, which strengthens our character. As everyone has their own unique strengths and challenges and is dealt a different hand, it becomes important to learn – and teach – that we need to *Surrender to the Fact that Life Isn't Fair* (chap. 17, p. 47). And, as Carlson points out, “perhaps, it was never intended to be” (p. 47). Since gifted children are often concrete thinkers, they tend to prefer learning from real life examples. Teaching them about the ingenuity involved in unfair moments of history, such as the Apollo13 mission or the Chilean Miners’ rescue, can help them integrate the need to appreciate and build on the skills they possess. Such lessons will make it obvious to them that merely wishing for what those men did not have, was not going to save them. Finding inspiration from real, unfair moments, or from inspirational quotes and posters, will help remind us that imperfections are just part of being human.

How often do you *Listen to your Feelings* (Carlson 1997, chap. 88, p. 217)? Do we treat them with the respect they deserve? Probably not ... who has the time? By pretending that negative feelings do not exist, we are ignoring our natural, internal barometer. Carlson observed that when left to focus on the negative feelings, there ends up being more to contend with. Being able to recognize the feelings being experienced will empower you to not “Sweat the Small Stuff” (Carlson, 1997). When feelings can be acknowledged, they become easier to address.

What about a strategy to cope with negative feelings? Such feelings arise from self-inflicted stressors, as well as from stressors that are tossed to you by others. As Carlson shares in chapter 89: *If Someone Throws You the Ball, You Don't Have to Catch It* (p. 219). If an insult or criticism is thrown your way, you can choose to catch it and feel insulted, or drop it and move on with your day. Helping children learn that there is no obligation to catch the ball, is an effective way to reduce the stress in their lives. By taking control, by realizing that we have a choice, we gain an appreciation and respect for our abilities

Knowledge is power, even social knowledge. Many gifted children learn through literal examples. Create a box of balls with situational scenarios scrawled on their surfaces. Toss the balls to your children. Practicing the act of catching and/or dropping a situation provides an opportunity to reinforce problem-solving skills. Taking the opportunity to review various situational scenarios at home helps to create a personal dialogue that, hopefully, will be internalized and drawn upon later. In addition, reviewing pertinent chapters within *The Unwritten Rules of Friendship* (Elman, Kennedy-Moore 2003) with your children is another tangible way to strengthen their resolve to reduce the stress in their lives.

There are many sources of stress out there; many of which are unavoidable. Being graded in school and being a part of after-school activities are constant stressors for all children (Kaplan, 1990). Which stress-reduction strategy can be learned to help sort between imminent

stressors and distant ones? Those with the ability to prioritize their stressors, have an enormous mental health benefit. This is when you want to learn how to *Experiment with Your Back Burner* (Carlson, 1997, chap. 23, p. 63). Consider the design of your stovetop – generally, the front burner is used for the pot needing immediate attention, while the back burner is used to hold the pot at a simmer. The simmering pot is not being ignored; just the priority has been shifted – it is no longer at the *front* of your mind. This strategy of shifting priorities, frees up the mind to focus on what needs immediate attention. It is a great strategy to use when feelings of stress begin to grow. Carlson (1997) reminds us that moving problems not solved today to the back burner is a gentle way to hold the problem in your mind without actively exploring it. One way to teach this strategy to gifted children is to ask them to help design a paper stove top. When completed, you would have them demonstrate how to prioritize their “pots.” Another way to help with visual reinforcement is to introduce and teach the benefits of a paper daily calendar. Both of these examples are ways to reinforce the use of visual cues to assist children with prioritizing and coping with their stressors.

How much time do your children spend looking outside, observing the wonders of what is happening around them? For some, to *Learn to Live in the Present Moment* (Carlson, 1997, chap. 10, p. 29) is a skill that can be taught, and should be learned. Understanding and believing that the present moment is where you always are, can help children reduce their fears about what may occur in the future. By learning how to bring your attention back to the present, you can begin to appreciate that *now* is the only time that we have control over. So, how can children be kept in the present? Be aware of what your children are reading or listening to. Learning about an avoidable oil spill that is devastating the ocean, is a multifaceted stress for gifted children. They begin thinking about engineering improvements, health or death of marine life, effects on the ecosystem, and so forth. By keeping such news away from younger children, you will be creating a more stress-free environment for them. If, however, they become concerned about an “adult problem,” for example world hunger, then encourage them to get involved at a local level, such as a food pantry or soup kitchen. This will enable them to feel that they can contribute to a cause on a more local level.

The authors discussed above, have produced a remarkable body of reference material for teachers and parents of gifted children. Although a brief summary of their work cannot do justice to their collective output, the following points are important to reiterate. Recognize and appreciate the various physical, emotional, and mental stressors affecting your gifted children. Understand that stress comes knowingly and unknowingly, from both gifted children themselves and from the adults or peers around them. Remember that messages left with children are heard – even if we don't think so. Try to live within a “Don't Sweat the Small Stuff” (Carlson, 1997) philosophy whenever possible. And, when the time is right, teach stress-reduction strategies to your gifted children in a patient, respectful, and honest manner.

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