

## **The Stress Factor**

### **Parenting Strategies – December 2009**

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With each passing week of the fall semester we can see the stress level rise in our children. I have never heard a parent or a student speak about experiencing a stress-free end to the semester or marking period. In fact, it is during these weeks that we often feel a heightened concern for our child's well-being. We wonder whether we should have guided our children differently, perhaps to have more strongly reminded them to prepare better for an impending test or to have taken on fewer commitments. My twelve-year-old began the school year with no co-curricular activities, but by week three she became her homeroom's representative for student government, joined the bike club, tried out for a spot in a vocal competition, got a lead role in the school play, and now as the semester draws to an end she has started basketball season. I am at that point where I wonder if she is doing too much. I see her wrestling with her "loves to do it all" spirit and the reality that bedtime comes quickly and the amount of homework and the number of tests have steadily increased.

In my experience as a student advisor, it is always at this point in the school year when students share how tired and stressed they are. It is also when they seem to experience increased self-doubt and confusion about the decisions that they have made pertaining to academic workload, social commitments and co-curricular involvement. Parents also reveal their stress, calling to check-in with the advising office to see if they can find out if their child has been in. The stress factor is in high gear, with students feeling overwhelmed and parents expressing deep concern.

So is there "bad stress" and "good stress?" There certainly is a lot written about both, and doctors and others weigh-in with research and data to support their findings and viewpoints. What I try to keep in mind is that what is stressful for one person might not be stressful for someone else. We see this in our own family systems. One child might love to be in the position of scoring the winning points

of the game, while another child might fear having that pressure. When parenting, it is important to keep in mind that stress can sometimes be positively channeled outward or internalized to be useful. When we see our children struggle it is difficult to stay in support mode, and to not jump in to save the day.

**Consider these tips as you support your child when he or she is experiencing stress:**

- Provide your child with a wider perspective and focus less on the immediate stressor – there is always an existence beyond the stressful situation or factor and you can help your child to visualize this.
- Help your child to recognize which factors are within his or her control and which are not – because one can only do something about the former, yet we often spend a lot of time focusing on factors that are truly out of our control.
- Refocus your child on his or her strengths and the steps he or she can take – because often our children will spend a lot of time talking about everyone else’s situation and comparing themselves to others.
- Redirect your child from the “what if” to focus instead on the “what is.”
- Reassure your child that your support is constant and not dependent on a positive or negative outcome.
- Remind your child about a situation where he or she actually performed well while experiencing stress. Maybe your student experienced stress the night before a big test and then used that stress as motivation to study extra hard.
- Invite your child to identify coping skills that have worked in the past and encourage your son or daughter to rev-up his or her healthy habits in anticipation of a stressful time of year.
- Help your child to identify any consistent patterns of stress that he or she experiences and then suggest that he or she think of possible strategies to deter onset.
- Use your judgment to determine if your child needs additional support or intervention. Ask yourself, “is what my child experiencing within the ‘normal’ range of what students go through?”
- Research the signs of negative stress and acquaint yourself with school and community resources.

- Monitor your own level of stress and find ways to effectively manage it. Stress is contagious!

As parents, we are fully aware that our children have experienced stress throughout their development, and that they will continue to experience varying degrees of stress throughout their life journey. We are best able to guide our children when we can model positive behaviors for how we manage and react to stress, and when we can help our children to refocus their stress to enhance their preparedness, improve their performance, and strengthen their motivation.

"Stress is not what happens to us. It's our response to what happens. And response is something we can choose." -Maureen Killoran