

## STRESS

We live in a very stressful world. Our children are affected by the stresses of every day life, both physically and emotionally, just as much as we are. The expectations of school and the push to excel are enough to bring on anxiety and depression, even in young children. I see signs of this sort of thing almost every day. The hurried lifestyles that have become the norm are not only contributing to emotional strain, but also to high blood pressure, ulcers, sleep disturbances, chronic headaches, and chronic abdominal pain, just to name a few. This has become a medical issue as well as a social issue – one that is starting to take its toll on younger children as well as adolescents.

Stressful lifestyles can begin at a very early age. It is not just a problem of sleep-deprived valedictorians trying to get into Ivy League schools. Just think of all of the videos, flashcards, and academic programs designed to help infants and toddlers become little geniuses! Some children never get the opportunity to be children – to simply play, without having to rush off to the next scheduled activity – and we as parents are often the driving forces behind this lifestyle that can be so stressful.

To be fair, parents do not intend to create stress by pushing their children too hard. They are truly doing what they think is the best way to prepare their children for the future and allow them to get as many opportunities as possible, with both academic and extracurricular pursuits. Our world is a competitive place, and the rigorous admissions standards of the finest schools demand that applicants must stand out from the crowd. The definition of a well-rounded college applicant has certainly changed since I applied to college in the mid 1980's. Extracurricular activities, which used to be considered optional, are now essential for most college applications, and community service is often required for high school graduation these days!

How in the world are they supposed to fit it all in? Between the extracurricular activities, jobs (for the teenagers), and the endless hours of homework, family meals with conversation and a good night's sleep have become things of the past for many kids. I know some kids who eat most of their evening meals in the car, on their way to the next activity. So often I see adolescents who never make it to bed before midnight. When their growing bodies need ten hours of sleep a night (or more), they are often lucky to get six. In their sleep-deprived states, they cannot function well at school, which only makes things worse.

All of these things have created such tremendous amounts of pressure on our kids that many have reached the breaking point. But it is not just the sleep-deprived teenagers who are affected by our fast-paced, high-stress lifestyles. It is starting to take its toll on younger kids as well. All too often, I see elementary school-aged children with chronic headaches and abdominal pain – classic symptoms of stress – who need a break from their never-ending activities. Some of these kids have two or three a day after school! They simply need some down-time.

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A few years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a report that emphasized the importance of unstructured playtime to promote healthy emotional development for younger children, and unscheduled free time to balance the demands of heavy academic loads and the excessive numbers of extracurricular activities for school-age children and adolescents. In the report, the authors discussed the adverse effects of hurried lifestyles, including the risks of anxiety and depression. They recognized the importance of academics and extracurricular activities in promoting healthy development (there is no doubt that organized sports promote physical health), but they pointed out the fact that many children have almost no “down time” to speak of, and they emphasized the emotional and educational benefits of having more of this unstructured time.

The problem often starts at an early age, so the solution must begin with the parents and educators of young children. Creating low-stress environments for young children will set the stage for later – it will show them right from the start that you do not expect them to run the treadmill. Continuing this approach throughout childhood will continually remind them that you do not expect them (or in some cases, will not allow them) to do more than they are comfortably able to do. It is possible to arrange activities that do not consume excessive amounts of time, but it is up to us – the parents – to set the limits. The new school year is almost upon us, so please keep this in mind when you start to plan your child’s fall activities.

Playtime is not wasted time. Young kids are constantly learning. Through play, young children learn how their bodies work, they develop the motor skills that will later become necessary for academic successes, and they learn how to interact with others, which is a skill that is vital for success throughout life. As parents, we need to recognize that every time they dig holes in the back yard, every time they see bugs on the sidewalk, and every time they come face to face with a child who is trying to climb up the slide at the fast food restaurant play place, our children are discovering how the world around them works.

I do not want this to sound like I am asking people to allow their kids to strive for mediocrity. I strongly believe that it is possible for kids to achieve success in life without sacrificing their physical and emotional health. We have all heard that stress reduction will help you feel better and live longer. Let us help this to be true for our children as well.