

HIGH ACHIEVERS

*actively
engaged
but
secretly
stressed*



keys to helping youngsters with stress reduction

“My daughter was just elected to student council and has been admitted to three advanced placement courses. Now she is trying out for the school play. I know she will be disappointed if she doesn’t get a leading role.”

“My son is annoyed. The school is offering moot court competitions at the same time as basketball. Now he will have to make a choice. I am considering calling the guidance counselor to see if the times can be rescheduled.”

“I am trying to schedule a time for my daughter to take SAT prep course. If she doesn’t score above 1200, I don’t know what we can do.”

*by Henry J. Nicols &
Dr. Susan Baum*

Do these comments sound familiar? Is your son or daughter over-scheduled? Is your child experiencing negative consequences of too much stress? We know that stress is an important and necessary part of life. It helps us reach our peak performance, enjoy the highs of life, and protects us from some disasters. However, when too many stressors overwhelm us in our lives, there can be both physical and emotional manifestations.

Many bright adolescents are earning top grades and are actively involved in a variety of activities. Ostensibly they appear healthy and happy. But for some, their productivity causes them to be secretly stressed. We use the term hidden stress syndrome to describe the subtle but problematic stress that many bright youngsters are experiencing, especially during adolescence. In general, they may seem to be happy, goal directed, and reaping academic rewards for their efforts. However, upon

closer investigation, a different picture emerges. Today, we are seeing youngsters with physiological symptoms, generalized feelings of anxiety, and a sense of urgency about college admission. Many of these manifestations of stress had their genesis much earlier when the youngsters were in elementary school.

We know that gifted children are particularly susceptible to stress for many reasons. Their high ability and perception that they must achieve encourage them to bite off much more than they can chew. Inadvertently, the adults in their world have contributed to the problem. You have provided many opportunities for your children to develop their talents as a means to assure them a better-than-average chance to succeed in a competitive world. In so doing parents and teachers alike may have become a part of the problem, not the solution.

Over the past 20 years, numerous studies have examined the social and emotional issues underlying the manifestations of stress in bright children. In her books, *The Gifted Kids Survival Guides 1 & 2*, Judy Galbraith described some of the complaints of gifted youngsters. Among them were the lack of challenge in school, inappropriate peer group, and expectations by adults for the children to perform perfectly.

Partially in reaction to those issues, parents have created and sought out talent development activities for their gifted youngsters. They have encouraged interaction with friends with similar interests and abilities. Schools, too, have provided an enriched environment with more challenging curricula and exciting after-school programs. Summer programs at universities as well as outstanding, and often competitive, extracurricular activities in the arts, athletics, debating, writing, and mock trial competitions are just a few of the activities that are available to bright, motivated students. Many secondary schools offer accelerated math and science courses, advanced placement classes, the International Baccalaureate

program, as well as community service and other independent study opportunities.

The problem for some high-potential youngsters is not the lack of challenging opportunities, but the students' lack of skill in making appropriate choices. Parents and teachers have been somewhat remiss in teaching gifted youngsters how to make choices, manage their time, or identify their passions. In fact, due to the competitive nature of their social setting or environment, and the parents' desire to have bright children accepted at the most prestigious universities, some students begin to harbor the belief that doing more is in their best interest. Growing up in today's world is very much different than it was just a generation ago. Child development specialists Laurence Coleman and Michael Sanders called attention to the fact that the social milieu has a profound effect on the adjustment of youth. The expectations placed on bright youngsters in today's competitive society potentially place these youngsters at risk of the negative effects of stress. Adolescence is an especially trying time for children as they begin to establish their own identities. They test limits, challenge parents, and explore possibilities. The choices they make are influenced by the social context in which they live. For bright and talented children the choices today are often overwhelming.

What stresses today's gifted and talented adolescents?

In the past year we had the pleasure of conducting a series of focus groups with high-ability students in middle and high school about their perceptions of the stress in their lives. The results offer some new insight into the lives of adolescents today and confirm their lack of ability to manage stress. As you might have suspected, gifted students recognize that they are experiencing significant negative stress. School is chief among their stressors. The students worry about their grades and their parents' reactions to their grades. Middle school students fear disappoint-

ing their parents, while high school students often believe that grades lower than an "A" jeopardize college acceptance. These students typically are enrolled in all honors or high-level classes. Choosing a less demanding course or one based on interest rather than rigor is not an option in their minds. Students feel that they needed to be well-rounded in athletics, arts, and academics in order to be admitted to the college of their choice. For these capable youngsters, high school is the time to build an impressive resume based often on quantity rather than quality of experience. Their interests or passions played a small role in decision making. Interestingly, even though the students feel they had to be involved in sports to maintain the image of the rounded student, many said that participating in sports causes considerable stress. Most of these students were involved in at least one competitive sport and reported feeling stressed by their coaches' expectations for winning. They fear letting down their coach or team.

Instead of providing safety or a respite from the stresses of the day, friends and relationships offer another source of stress. Many of these bright youngsters are very sensitive and have high expectations for friendships. They worry about disappointing their friends or being disappointed themselves. Trust and loyalty are major issues for them. Because the students are overwhelmed with academics and extracurricular activities, they often sacrifice things they value and know are important to their physical well-being. They unanimously admit that they do not have enough time to sleep or eat. Sleep seems often to be the only time that provided flexibility and is expendable ("I need to do extra homework, I sleep less."). The opportunity to enjoy time with family, to have fun with friends, or just "hang out" is high on their wish lists, but often beyond reasonable expectation.

Even in elementary school, children are often over-scheduled with little time to amuse themselves, develop their imagination, or dream about the future

and their role in it. Little time is available for reading for pleasure not for an assignment, or creating for the sake of creating.

How do our children deal with stress?

We discovered that children might be as overwhelmed by stress as are adults. We know that stress is a major killer of adults in our society. Youngsters have learned inappropriate coping skills from their adult role models. The students talk of feeling angry or sad. But instead of identifying and prioritizing tasks and then tackling the tasks at hand, they will often talk to friends for hours on the phone or watch television to escape. Others simply give up eating and sleeping to get their tasks done. One boy explained that he felt that every hour had to be filled or he would be wasting time.

Some students described feeling physically ill. Their symptoms often included headaches and stomachaches. Several students described experiencing tremors. Some talked about crying and generally having difficulty communicating their feelings. They find it especially difficult to communicate these symptoms to adults. Others described feeling irritated and having a difficult time falling asleep.

Younger children who feel stressed often spend considerable time with the school nurse complaining of stomachaches and headaches. A principal described her alarm at the increasing number of physical ailments of youngsters in her district. She described a fourth grader who has recently been diagnosed with ulcers: "He worries about everything."

How can we help? Seven Strategies for Stress Management!

There is only one time you will be without stress—and that is when you are dead. Stress is an integral and important part of life. It helps us to achieve more, perform better, and fulfill great expectations. Unmanaged stress is often cited as a major factor contributing to disease and death in adults.

Adults must work to prevent stress from negatively affecting youngsters today. Parents can have a major role in helping their children deal appropriately with the stress in their lives. We have found the following strategies very useful in working with both adults and children. Any of them can help you understand what causes stress for your youngsters and may be helpful in improving their ability to manage it. (A side benefit is that you may decrease your own stress as well.)

The first six strategies describe long-term investments that can be used to help create a less stressful lifestyle. The earlier you start practicing these strategies the more you can prevent your children from developing inappropriate levels of anxiety. The last strategy involves techniques for dealing with especially stressful moments. These techniques can help to diffuse short-term, immediate stress and to make the most of a challenging moment.

1

Help your children to identify their values, hopes, and dreams so that they live a life consistent with their values and goals.

Share with them lessons that you have learned about your goals, how you find meaning in life, and how you decide what matters most. Children often report school as a significant stressor because of the way they are encouraged to believe their lives depend on their daily performance. A student told us during a focus group, "It is important to stay up late studying. One bad grade can ruin your life!"

Do you believe that? More importantly, does your son or daughter believe that? Will success in life be contingent upon receiving all "A"s or taking every honors course? The reality may be that, if there is too much emphasis on grades, students may be pressured beyond what is reasonable and lose sight of what is important. Teen suicide statistics show that, tragically, some children do believe a single failure can lead to a "ruined life." Consequently, paying for that failure with their life becomes an option.

2.

Create opportunities to identify and explore the issues with your children.

Do you take the time to talk with your sons or daughters about their lives? Consider discussing with them who they are and who they dream of becoming. Too often conversations with children focus on what they accomplish rather than how they feel, what they think, and what they want and need. Your verbal interactions with them are powerful indicators of what your interest is in their lives. The expectation that they will win your praise only if they produce is detrimental to their adjustment and your relationship. One young man we interviewed described his dream of becoming a philosophy professor but will apply to business school to please his parents. What message are you giving your child?

3.

Use family meetings to discuss issues.

Meeting together allows all members of the family to participate in decision making. When children feel their opinions are valued, they are more likely to talk about what is bothering them. Use a symbol to assure active listening and participation (for example, we use a heart shaped pillow). Only the person with the pillow may speak, and until the pillow is relinquished, the possessor has the exclusive right to speak. Everyone gets a turn with the pillow until all have had the chance to say all they will. While making decisions at these meetings, try using Creative Problem Solving – a natural, flexible process that makes solving problems and prioritizing goals constructive and enjoyable, rather than stressful. Many materials are available about this framework for both children and adults. For more information, consult the sources at the end of this article.

4.

Establish weekly "walk and talks."

Walking briskly outdoors in the fresh air is healthy in and of itself. It is a habit that could be developed into a lifelong,

longevity-enhancing practice. We know that physical activity such as walking not only benefits health but also reduces the negative chemical effects of stress. Walking and talking contributes to relationship building, bonding, and general overall health. When was the last time you walked? When was the last time you walked holding hands with someone you love? Sounds corny? Try it. It works!

5.

Create balance in your life.

We all need balance in our lives. Balance should include work, fun, sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Without that balance, stress can become overwhelming. The students we spoke to often skip meals and sleep to complete tasks they believed of greater priority. One young woman remarked, “After completing school assignments, after-school activities, and homework who has time for fun or sleep?” We asked her when she is happiest. She answered, “I am happiest when I ride my horse and can just be myself.”

Her peers agreed. “Having time alone to reflect is wonderful. My favorite time is waiting alone for the school bus. I think and dream. Everything seems possible.”

Help your youngsters value recreational down time by modeling it for them. Do you have a balance in your life? Most adults model inappropriate stress management behaviors. How about you? Do you have time for fun? Do you take time to do what matters most? Every day?

As Steven Covey describes in his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, every task in your life can fall into one of four quadrants. Quadrant 1 contains items that are “Important and Urgent.” Quadrant 2 lists things that are “Important and Not Urgent.” Quadrant 3 includes items that are “Not Important but Urgent.” Quadrant 4 describes those things that are “Not Important and Not Urgent.”

The figure at the top right gives some examples of tasks in each quadrant.

Q-1 Important and Urgent

- Family crisis
- Project due now
- Medical emergencies
- Studying for tomorrow’s test

Q-3 Not Important and Urgent

- Most email
- Many meetings
- Most telephone calls
- Many tasks with no priority

Q-2 Important and Not Urgent

- Planning
- Recreation
- Relationship building
- Doing what matters most

Q-4 Not Important and Not Urgent

- TV
- Roaming around at the mall
- Surfing the net
- Endless phone calls

Have members of the family create their own chart by filling in a typical day’s activities. Figure out where each of you spends most of your time. Have you considered the effects of spending a majority of time in each of the four quadrants? There are negative and positive effects as summarized below.

Q-1 Important and Urgent

- High stress and anxiety
- Risk of heart & other diseases
(Yes, even our children are getting ulcers, tics, and tremors.)
- Premature death
- Stress on relationships
- Increased incident of drug use

Q-3 Not Important and Urgent

- The body cannot tell the difference between something “important and urgent” and something “not important and urgent.”
- The health effects are the same as in Q-1

Q-2 Important and Not Urgent

- Improved relationships
- Doing what matters most to you
- Planning reduces time in Q-1 & Q-3
- Recreation allows for RE-CREATION
- Living a life that meets your values and fulfills your goals

Q-4 Not Important and Not Urgent

- Lack of exercise
- Poor relationships
- Becoming a couch potato
- Weight and health problems
- Underachievement

How do you then choose to spend your time? Where will you get the time to do what matters most? Below are some strategies to maximize your opportunities!

Q-1 Important and Urgent

Do this NOW!

Q-3 Not Important and Urgent

- Identify
- Delegate
- Eliminate

Q-2 Important and Not Urgent

Maximizing time in Q-2, such as planning, reduces the time spent in Q-1 & Q-3 and gives you the time to do what is most important to you.

Q-4 Not Important and Not Urgent

Eliminate activities that are truly a waste of time or reassign the activities that help you to relax and enjoy true recreational opportunities you identified in Q-2.

6.

Encourage your children to have a creative outlet.

Some people engage in creative activities because they find joy in the performance. When people are creating, they are lost in the moment. Stress just disappears. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a developmental psychologist who studies creativity and happiness, describes these experiences as being in a “state of flow.” What creative activity does your child love for its own sake? Perhaps it is dance, photography, building with Legos®, sketching, or writing poetry. Supporting children in pursuing what they love is the single best way that we can help them have a balanced life. During stressful moments or days, taking an hour and playing the piano or writing a poem will have a positive effect on reducing stress.

The strategies briefly described thus far explain long-term investments for creating a less stressful lifestyle. They take time and practice, but will pay healthy dividends. The next strategy describes techniques to diffuse the discomfort of stressful moments. We refer to them as stress busters.

7.

Teach and model the use of stress busters.

We admit that there are times when the demand of the moment can be overwhelming, calling for an instant stress buster guaranteed to manage the moment. Try the following:

Deep breathing. A typical breath uses only about 60% of the capacity of the lungs. During stressful times deep, focused breathing where the breath is held for just a matter of seconds can instantly lower the blood pressure, slow the pulse, and help keep things in perspective. Focus on the breathing, think of the muscles being used, and try to use the abdominal muscles. An easy way to learn abdominal muscle breathing is to lie flat on your back on the floor, place a heavy book on your stomach, and focus on the muscles used to breathe while moving the book up and down.

Disassociation (sometimes called visualization). Being able to mentally create a nonstressful situation is a favorite stress management technique of soldiers, mountain climbers, and others who need to reduce the stress of the moment by focusing on another time and place. While climbing Mount Rainier stuck in a tent in near zero temperatures for 48 hours in a storm with 70 mph winds, one of the authors disassociated to the Grand Canyon, and the hot dessert. While crossing the Kiabab Plateau in temperatures over 100 degrees carrying a 50-pound pack, he disassociated to vanilla milk shakes. Disassociation is easy to learn. Focus on where you would choose to be. Go there. We know that the body cannot tell the difference between an experience that is real and one that is vividly imagined. So, think where you would choose to be! Accept no excuse; go there!

Finding someone to talk to. Remember a burden shared is a burden lightened. Just having a friend, a counselor, an advisor—someone who is trusted to share the burden—can be reassuring. Thinking that there is no one who would listen can be dangerous. It forces us to carry on alone. Encourage your child to have a trusted person with whom they can share the many challenges and burdens when they are feeling especially tense.

Neck Rolls. A final effective, easy to learn, instant stress buster is to roll the head and neck. Begin slowly and easily without quick movements and without straining. Tilt the head back, tilt the head forward touching the chin to the chest, gently roll the head 360 degrees clockwise, then repeat counter clockwise. Repeat the entire process for six repetitions.

A final word

Stress is an important and necessary part of our lives. But when it becomes overwhelming it can have powerful negative effects. Inappropriate stress management, or simply too much stress, may lead to depression, disease, premature death, relationship failures, drug

use, and, in extreme cases, suicide. Remember that you might be a poor role model for stress management and inadvertently underestimate and elevate the level of stress in your children. To help children alleviate stress, begin by modeling healthy habits and making decisions based on your values and passions. As you improve your management of unhealthy stress, you will help your children learn to cope with even the most stressful moments. In short, by modeling a lifestyle in which you control stress rather than letting it control you, you will help both you and your child to live longer, more productive, and happier lives. 🌱

Henry Nicols is the Director of System Support for Bassett Healthcare in Cooperstown, NY and is completing a book on children and stress in the international community. Dr. Susan Baum is a professor at the College of New Rochelle and is involved in a variety of projects addressing the needs of gifted students."

Helpful Resources

- Covey, Sean. (1998). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens: The Ultimate Teenage Success Guide*. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Davis, M., Robbins, M., Eshelman, M., & McKay, M. (1998). *Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Peterson, Jean (1995) *Talk with Teens About Feelings, Family, Relationships and the Future*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit.
- Peterson, J. (1993) *Talk with Teens About Self and Stress*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit.
- Romain T. & Verdick, E. (2000). *Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit.
- Treffinger, D., Isaksen, S., & Dorval, K. (2000). *Creative Problem Solving: An Introduction* (3rd edition). Waco, Texas: Prufrock.

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Looking Ahead Constructively...

Our historical data about *PHP* readership tell us that a great majority of our readers are parents with pre-teen children. However, in a recent survey I conducted in preparation for assuming the Editor's role, a surprising number of responses indicated an interest in articles that address the issues and needs parents face in guiding and nurturing older youngsters (including both the middle school and high school levels). The challenges of effective parenting for high-ability youth do not disappear when children reach adolescence. Some of our readers are already experiencing this reality, and the rest of you can take note that there are still quite a few interesting experiences awaiting you. In this issue of *PHP*, then, our writers address topics and themes that relate to the adolescent years, although we asked them to be aware of implications for parents of younger people as well. We hope you will all discover in these articles a number of issues, ideas, and practical suggestions that you can relate to your own present or future needs and concerns.

This issue marks the completion of our three-part series on learning styles. Dr. Carolyn Cooper, whose work has appeared before in our pages, describes Gregor's "Mindstyles" theory and its implications for students, parents, and educators. Through this series, I hope you have discovered that, even though many theorists and researchers "define differences differently," each person's talents and gifts will always be colored or influenced by the unique style strengths and preferences they bring to the learning or working experience. Each of the three models we



Editorial by Dr. Don Treffinger

have highlighted offers insights into how we can help people to be and become the best they can be.

In their feature article, Henry Nicols and Dr. Susan Baum share a number of helpful ways to recognize and respond constructively to many

sources of stress that high potential youth (and adults) experience in daily life. In Resource Round Up, Rachel Knox identifies useful resources to help young people and their parents deal with similar issues and concerns. Dr. Sylvia Rimm completes her two-part response to helping high-ability girls become successful and productive adults. Dr. Del Siegle adds research-based pointers to promote achievement in successful but constructive ways.

Throughout this issue, then, we are wrestling with social-emotional issues that can be very complicated and challenging to deal with—for teachers, parents, and for young people themselves. We hope the articles will help you to gain confidence and competence in your own efforts.

The forthcoming issues of *PHP* in 2001 will feature several exciting, contemporary opportunities for nurturing the strengths and talents of high potential children and youth, involving the home and the community as well as the school setting. We will also be introducing a new regular feature that we hope will invite you not only to learn from what you read here, but also to contribute to *PHP* in new ways, too. Stay tuned... and invite some of your friends to join us!

HIGH ACHIEVERS

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Websites:

(www.prufrock.com) Prufrock Press publishes many books on Creative Problem Solving and gifted education.

(www.creativelearning.com) The Center for Creative Learning specializes in Creative Problem Solving applications for children or adults in educational settings.

(www.cpsb.com) The Creative Problem Solving Group-Buffalo works with business organizations throughout the world to apply Creative Problem Solving.

(www.freespirit.com) Free Spirit Publications has many books written mostly for children and teens about social and emotional issues.

(www.stress.org) The American Institute of Stress has a comprehensive web page linking you to aspects of stress both good and bad.



KIDS' KALEIDOSCOPE

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<http://www.funbrain.com/kidscenter.html>: FunBrain.com has a lot of word, number, universe, culture and other games to spark your interest and brainpower!

GAME KITS

Make-Your-Own Opoly by TDC Games Inc.

Manufacturer's suggested age range: 8 years and up, ASIN: B00000K210, \$24.99.

If you want to create your own unique version of the popular game Monopoly then this is the kit for you! This kit includes cards, play money, CD-ROM, floppy disk, paper, label set, game board, six colored pawns, two dice, publishing booklet, game instructions the actual box. While creating this game you can use a computer and printer or a pen and scissors.