

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

## This month’s topic: “What should we know about gifted children and stress?”

### A Teacher’s View

It is mid-February again, just a week before vacation. I’ve noticed a heightened anxiety and stress level among many of my high-ability students, many of whom are involved in many activities outside the classroom. They often complain about the homework I and other teachers give, claiming “We do have lives you know.” Some students seem to have given up completely, not even finishing assignments.

On one hand I understand the many pressures that my students face, and I don’t blame them for feeling stressed. On the other hand, I do want them to “stay with the struggle” and recognize their abilities in many different areas. When they see the fruit of hard work and dedication, then they’ll find reward and satisfaction in all they do.

I just don’t want them to give up. How can I get through to them...without giving them more stress?

### A Parent’s View

This year our oldest daughter was able to move to an excellent charter school. She was excited. We were thrilled at the opportunity. Yet things have been progressively unraveling at home since the change. Ellen has begun to pick at her siblings, sometimes really lashing out. Bedtime has become a struggle as she’s having obvious problems getting to sleep. During the day, she’s been biting her lips raw and twisting her hair. She says nothing is wrong.

I first learned she’s been breaking down in tears from the bus driver. When I called the teacher to find out what was happening in class, she told me that my daughter has been pretty much a loner, reluctant to participate in most group activities, but she [the teacher] wasn’t worried because Ellen was doing quite well academically.

What’s going on? How can we make things better?

With daily reminders of responsibilities, obligations, deadlines, debts, and doubts, how and where can we help children find the inner calm required for optimal learning? This is not an inconsequential question – scientists now acknowledge the inarguable effects of stress on how well our bodies and minds work. Stress is a two-edged sword: While it can provide the mental sharpness that allows for fast thinking, it can also serve to dull memory function, impede decision-making, and disrupt learning.

Different people deal with stress in different ways. That’s why “stress physiology” (the study of how stressors affect us) has become a distinct scientific discipline. While recent research offers some ways to cope with the many pressures of modern life, parents and educators must first be able to recognize what and where stressors might exist for gifted children. For example, we know that not all stress comes from sudden or singular events such as a death in the family, or a divorce. Emotional stress can be the result of a combination of triggers that add up over time.

## 1. Hidden, and not-so-hidden stressors

### AT SCHOOL

Unclear expectations or rules can create stress in the classroom. Gifted children often need to have clear expectations for themselves and for their assignments. While enriching, open-ended questioning and independent projects can prove stressful if the outcomes are too broad.

Challenging environments can be stressful to some, but a lack of challenge can be just as stressful. Simply watering down the curriculum will not do. Instead, take a new approach to the challenging materials. Help students by setting small goals and/or intermittent due dates for long-term projects to help reduce stress.

As gifted children mature, instances of “failure” might become more common. Teachers in the middle grades need to be aware that they may be the first teacher to put a low mark on a student’s paper. Watch student reactions carefully. Talk about grades as measures of learning, not value.

### AT HOME

Lack of predictability can lead to stress. When things constantly feel in flux, schedules are continually modified, and commitments are ignored or forgotten, it contributes to children’s stress in two important ways: First, children don’t learn to plan or anticipate positively. Second, without stated expectations, children can become passive and unmotivated over time, not knowing how (or if) they affect their schedules of other family decisions.

Many gifted children have active imaginations, which contributes to high stress when they worry about things that might happen or about things over which they have no control. It’s called anticipatory stress.

Gifted children may hide their stress from those who are invested in their achievement. Learn more in “The Role of Teachers when Gifted Students Experience Negative Life Events” in the Winter, 2009 issue of NAGC’s *Teaching for High Potential* available on the NAGC website.

## 2. “Inoculating” students against destructive stress

### AT SCHOOL

Social support, from teachers and from peers, is quite important in helping gifted children deal with stress according to the study “Protective factors as barriers to depression in gifted and non-gifted adolescents.” Teachers should seek to create a welcoming environment in their classrooms. Students need to feel they belong and are emotionally safe. You can read more in the Winter, 2009 issue of NAGC’s *Gifted Child Quarterly*.

Peer group or advisory activities open up lines of communication. It’s important to help gifted children to recognize, discuss, and develop strategies for organization and time management.

Be aware, alert, and sensitive to changes in students’ behaviors. Keep materials related to the social & emotional lives of gifted children available for students and families.

### AT HOME

Since too little, or poor quality sleep contributes to stress and stress contributes to poor sleep, it’s essential to pay attention to sleep habits at home.

Stress can increase cravings for carbohydrates, sugar, and fatty foods. Offering healthy, regular meals and snacks is important.

Make home a safe haven – a place with clear, reasonable expectations, and with opportunities to re-charge from the day’s events. Excellent strategies for stress reduction can be found in the December 2000 article, “High Achievers – Actively Engaged, but Secretly Stressed” from *Parenting for High Potential* which is available on the NAGC website.

Help your child learn more about the fascinating stress-response system. You can read and share information with your family from *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers: The Acclaimed Guide To Stress, Stress-related Diseases, And Coping* by R.M. Sapolsky (Owl Books, 2004).

## 3. What to do when bad things are happening

### AT SCHOOL

Validation of student feelings is important. When students are given permission to freely express sad feelings, the ability to cope increases. Read more in “The role of teachers when gifted students experience negative life events” from the Winter, 2009 issue of *Teaching for High Potential*, available on the NAGC website.

### AT HOME

Shift perspective to what IS okay, away from the source of the problem. Try a physical break. Get outdoors and explore. Play a vigorous game. Take a day trip. Focus on enjoyable activities together. More ideas can be found on NAGC’s searchable *Mile Marker Series* CD-ROM available for sale on the NAGC website.