



Causes of Childhood Stress and its Effect

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Abstract:

Stress is an inevitable part of life. Human beings experience stress early, even before they are born. A certain amount of stress is normal and necessary for survival. Stress helps children develop the skills they need to cope with and adapt to new and potentially threatening situations throughout life. Support from parents and/or other concerned caregivers is necessary for children to learn how to respond to stress in a physically and emotion-ally healthy manner. Via this article the author wants to convey the effect of mental stress on human being.

Keywords: *Childhood, Disorder, Effect, Human being, Mental stress*

1. Introduction

The beneficial aspects of stress diminish when it is severe enough to over-whelm a child's ability to cope effectively. Intensive and prolonged stress can lead to a variety of short- and long-term negative health effects. It can disrupt early brain development and compromise functioning of the nervous and immune systems. In addition, childhood stress can lead to health problems later in life including alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

2. What is Childhood Stress?

Childhood Stress can broadly be defined as a condition or situation that places a demand on the body's physical, mental, or emotional energy. Even though moderate stress disturbs the body's homeostasis as a person tries to cope with life's constant changes, it builds the body's immunity to some extent if properly managed. On the other hand extreme stress conditions, especially those experienced by children, can be detrimental to health in the long run.

3. Causes of Childhood Stress

Children all over the world grow up suffering from mild to severe stress for various reasons being bullied, falling out with friends, school tests, viewing violence on screen, domestic violence and with increasing divisive forces in the world, children are even teased and bullied for adult reasons such as caste and creed in some parts of the world. The rising influence of media influences children watching TV serials and fashion shows with skinny models, to live on adult levels prematurely.

Graphic details of terror and war leave some kids shell-shocked as while witnessing the Taj terror and the injured kids in the Israel-Gaza violence on TV. Concurrently it even spurs some of them to play violent computer and video games like Doom, Mortal Kombat and the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series. Children face acute emotional stress because they are vulnerable and cannot wield control over a worrying or frightening situation that they fear can harm them. Some children experience acute physical stress when forced into child labor and made to perform difficult tasks that take a toll on their physical, mental and emotional health. Be it the children of

divorced parents or over ambitious parents, children of poor parents or orphans whose tender hands roll tobacco for beads (cheap cigarettes), work in dungeons weaving intricate designs in exquisite carpets or double stitching football seams, or cleaning tables, mopping floors or washing dishes in restaurants, or doing manual labor in building sites or working in brothels to please pedophiles—the stress is definitely there, in varying degrees of intensity.

4. Symptoms of Childhood Stress

Symptoms of stress include stomach aches, headaches, bed wetting, cold and sweaty hands, temper tantrums, depression, anxiety disorders, grinding teeth, irritability, nervousness, emotional withdrawal and many others. It is imperative that parents, elders or guardians recognize these stress symptoms and address the stressful situation so that the child gets to lead a normal, happy life.

5. Stress from Environmental Factors

A study that appeared in the Nov/Dec issue of Child Development found secure relationships with parents and teachers protect children from rising cortisol levels in stressful situations. The study suggested that care givers in childcare facilities sometimes increased kids' stress levels. According to medical experts the sudden spike in cortisol, a stress hormone is of grave concern because frequent increase of cortisol levels can have a negative impact on health. A study supported by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, suggests that pathogenic effects of stress caused by a traumatic childhood experience including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect can interact with other risk factors and trigger chronic fatigue syndrome symptoms during adulthood by affecting the central nervous system, neuroendocrine system and immune systems.

Sociologist Dr. Michael Flood who co-authored a study titled "An Assault on Our Future: The impact of violence on young people and their relationships" observed that watching a violent parent could damage a child's attitude and psyche even if the child was not at the receiving end of a physical assault. Studying the biological responses of 208 primarily white, 6-year-old kids, scientists from the Universities of Rochester, Notre Dame and Minnesota, studied their saliva samples before and after telephone arguments between their parents and found that the children who were very distressed by the conflicts had increased levels of cortisol in response to their parents' fighting.

6. Tips for Parents and Elders to deal with Child Stress

- Understand that children constantly observe elders and inappropriate adult behavior can confuse and stress children for instance, while swearing at traffic snarls you could be passing on the tension to a child co-passenger.
- Guide children to participate in interactive groups and meaningful activities to de-stress
- Introduce children to soothing music at a very early age.
- While spending quality time with children create an atmosphere of trust wherein they can share their fears, anxieties and concerns.
- Cultivate a sense of humor and teach children that laughter is the best medicine.
- Never load children with too many after-school classes thinking it will benefit their future it may ruin their present.
- Let children learn that making occasional mistakes is a part of life and let them learn to forgive, from us.
- If you have to criticize children, control your anger and help children understand the rationale behind the good behavior we expect of them.

- Never burden your children with the task of fulfilling your dreams and ambitions
- Elders need to learn and demonstrate positive coping mechanisms so children can grow up emulating them.
- Inferiority complex, superiority complex, identity crisis and depression are some serious aspects of negativity that adults consciously or inadvertently thrust on children, robbing them the sweetness of their childhood. We owe the very best to children not just because they are the future of the world but because, in the words of Khalil Gibran,

7. Types of Stress

Following are descriptions of the three types of stress that The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has identified based on available research.

7.1 Positive Stress

Positive stress results from adverse experiences that are short-lived. Children may encounter positive stress when they attend a new daycare, get a shot, meet new people, or have a toy taken away from them. This type of stress causes minor physiological changes including an increase in heart rate and changes in hormone levels. With the support of caring adults, children can learn how to manage and overcome positive stress. This type of stress is considered normal and coping with it is an important part of the development process.

7.2 Tolerable Stress

It refers to adverse experiences that are more intense but still relatively short-lived. Examples include the death of a loved one, a natural disaster, a frightening accident, and family disruptions such as separation or divorce. If a child has the support of a caring adult, tolerable stress can usually be overcome. In many cases, tolerable stress can become positive stress and benefit the child developmentally. However, if the child lacks adequate support, tolerable stress can become toxic and lead to long-term negative health effects.

7.3 Toxic Stress

An example of toxic stress is child maltreatment, which includes abuse and neglect. Children are unable to effectively manage this type of stress by themselves. As a result, the stress response system gets activated for a prolonged amount of time. This can lead to permanent changes in the development of the brain. The negative effects of toxic stress can be lessened with the support of caring adults. Appropriate support and intervention can help in returning the stress response system back to its normal baseline.

8. The Effects of Toxic Stress on Brain Development in Early Childhood

The ability to manage stress is controlled by brain circuits and hormone systems that are activated early in life. When a child feels threatened, hormones are released and they circulate throughout the body. Prolonged exposure to stress hormones can impact the brain and impair functioning in a variety of ways.

- Toxic stress can impair the connection of brain circuits and, in the extreme, result in the development of a smaller brain. Brain circuits are especially vulnerable as they are developing during early childhood. Toxic stress can disrupt the development of these circuits. This can cause an individual to develop a low threshold for stress, thereby becoming overly reactive to adverse experiences through-out life. High levels of stress hormones, including cortisol, can suppress the body's immune response. This can leave an individual vulnerable to a variety of infections and chronic health problems.

- Sustained high levels of cortisol can damage the hippocampus, an area of the brain responsible for learning and memory. These cognitive deficits can continue into adulthood.
- The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has been studying the effects of toxic stress on brain development. Papers summarizing the scientific literature can be found on-line at www.developingchild.net.

9. Effect of Stress on the immune System

Stress is the body's reaction to any stimuli that disturb its equilibrium. When the equilibrium of various hormones is altered the effect of these changes can be detrimental to the immune system. Much research has shown a negative effect stress has on the immune system, mostly through studies where participants were subjected to a variety of viruses. In one study, individuals caring for a spouse with dementia, representing the stress group, saw a significant decrease in immune response when given an influenza-virus vaccine compared to a non-stressed control group. A similar study was conducted using a respiratory virus. Participants were infected with the virus and given a stress index. Results showed that an increase in score on the stress index correlated with greater severity of cold symptoms. Studies with HIV have also shown stress to speed up viral progression. Men with HIV were 2–3 times more likely to develop AIDS when under above average stress.

10. Effects of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress is defined as a "state of prolonged tension from internal or external stressors, which may cause various physical manifestations – e.g., asthma, back pain, arrhythmias, fatigue, headaches, HTN, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, and suppress the immune system". Chronic stress takes a more significant toll on your body than acute stress does. It can raise blood pressure, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, increase vulnerability to anxiety and depression, contribute to infertility, and hasten the aging process. For example, results of one study demonstrated that individuals who reported relationship conflict lasting one month or longer have a greater risk of developing illness and show slower wound healing. Similarly, the effects that acute stressors have on the immune system may be increased when there is perceived stress and/or anxiety due to other events. For example, students who are taking exams show weaker immune responses if they also report stress due to daily hassles.

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