STRESS IN ELEMENTARY CHILDREN

By

Marcy L. Kusz

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APPROVED BY: Derek L. Anderson, Ed.D.

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Abstract

Changes in our society have put new pressures and stresses on elementary children. Many children are now starting to feel the pressures of our society and are beginning to show higher signs of stress and anxiety. One way that we can begin to deal with these "over stressed" students is to try to reach out to them in our schools. Guidance counselors and teachers often have more contact with students each week than parents do, therefore a logical place to begin de-stressing these students is in school. Schools need to look at the causes of stress is in elementary children, the steps schools can be take to alleviate some of the stress, and the ways schools can work to teach stress and anxiety coping skills to students. Schools can also work to educate parents as well as the general public on how to better help this generation of high-anxiety students.

Chapter I: Introduction

This literature review examines the cause of stress and anxiety in elementary school children and what teachers and counselors can do to help these students to deal with this stress and anxiety. There are many causes inside and outside of school that contribute to the everyday stressors of children, things such as environmental disasters and exposure by the media (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, crime, murder, war, etc.), family issues (financial, divorce, stepparents, separation, illness, homelessness, etc.), and school issues (grades, expectations, peer interactions, bullying, etc.).

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this paper is to look at the increasing level of stress found in elementary children and what can be done to help these children to cope with their stress and anxiety. Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, Sermon, and Zwakhalen (1988) reported that nearly 70% of elementary school children have everyday worries and anxiety, and 5% of elementary school children exhibit signs of extreme worry and anxiety. There are many things that need to be considered in looking at this problem of stress in elementary school children. What is causing the stress? How are the children dealing with the stress? What are schools doing to help the children to deal with their stress? What can be done to help these children to deal with this stress?

Ever increasing demands are being put on our children and we need to look at how we can help them to better cope with these demands. Children spend 7-8 hours a day sitting in a classroom, so clearly a teacher or counselor could make a difference in the life of an overstress child. The research in this paper will help educators look at where they can begin, and what can be done to help these students.

Research Question

What are the causes of stress and anxiety in elementary children and how can elementary teachers and counselors help to reduce their stress and help these children cope more effectively?

Definition of Terms

Adolescence: A stage of human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood begins with puberty and ends with completed growth and physical maturity (Pugh, 2000).

Anxiety: Distress of uneasiness of the mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune. Fear or apprehension or dread of danger (Pugh, 2000).

Anxiety Disorders: An excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations, a group of mental disorders that cause worry, distress and fear (Grolier, 2002).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) : A form of therapy for depression in which the goal is to reduce symptoms by correcting negative thinking based on negative self-perceptions, expectations, and thoughts as well as change negative behavioral patterns (Grolier, 2002).

Depression: A condition of general withdrawal, sadness, and low self-esteem (Grolier, 2002).

Development: the act or process of developing; growth; progress of in physical and physical and psychological maturation (Pugh, 2000).

Emotion: A state of consciousness in which joy, sorrow, fear, or hate is experienced, some sort of strong mood or feeling, helps to prepare the body for an action (Grolier, 2002).

Phobias: An abnormal, and irrational fear of a specific thing or situation that compels one to avoid it, even though it is often realized that it is not dangerous (Grolier, 2002).

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): Isolating one muscle group, creating tension for 8-10 seconds then letting the muscle relax and the tension go (Allen & Klein, 1996).

Relaxation: Loosening, lengthening, or lessening of tension in the body or muscles

(Pugh, 2000).

Self-efficacy: Peoples beliefs about their capabilities to accomplish something. Beliefs

that determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave (Pugh, 2000).

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Everyday life stressors seem to have increased in the last few decades. At some point and time everyone experiences some form of stress and/or fear. Stress and anxiety become a major concern when it begins to affect everyday normal functioning in a person's life (Frank, 2003). Anxiety disorders in some form or another affect as many as 19 million Americans (Frank). The DSM IV defines anxiety: "The apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune accompanied by a fear of dysphoria or somatic symptoms of tension. The focus of danger may be internal or external." As reported by Gorman in 2002 researchers at UCLA found that less than 25% of Americans with anxiety disorders receive any sort of treatment or help with their condition.

Today's children face many pressures from outside sources, such as environmental dangers, media exposure, family issues, school problems and often times internalization of stressful events and situations. The purpose of this research is to show some of the root causes behind the stress and anxiety that children are dealing with. It is also important to look at a few preventative strategies, and coping skills to help children to better deal with the situations that may arise.

The Effects of Stress

Stress can have both positive and negative effects on a child. Some stress for everyone is normal and healthy; it keeps us alert and aware of the things that are happening around us. However, excessive stress can be quite harmful to a child. Research has shown that the negative effects of stress on children under the age of 10 are far more profound and longer lasting (Jewett & Peterson, 2003). Dealing with stress is dependent on a child's developmental level as well as their development of coping-skills at that age

(Jewett & Peterson). Children that are exposed to long term stressors and continued use of unhealthy coping strategies can result in behavior patterns that may be difficult to change, due to the fact that the child begins to see these strategies as being effective (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

Each individual child can be affected differently by stress. Symptoms may present themselves internally as well as externally. As observed by experts, a child's physical response to stress may be presented as more intense that that of an adult and often times involves the whole body (Zegans, 1982). Stress is a physical and/or emotional strain on the body and mind (Frank, 2003). When the stain and pressure becomes too much to handle, this is called distress or negative stress (Frank). According to Allen and Klein, experts have found that up to 75% of medical disorders are caused by the effects of stress.

Looking at how stress can present itself internally as well as externally can help professionals to begin to identify "stressed" children. The body can react in a number of ways such as blurred vision, headaches, tense muscles, back pain, cold hands and feet, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, stomach aches, digestive problems, unusual sweat and perspiration (Frank, 2003). Symptoms can also present themselves in emotional and behavioral changes in a child. Possible symptoms are: changes in sleeping patterns, changes in eating patterns, restlessness, loss of interest in normal activities, feeling of worthlessness, poor self-esteem, poor self-efficacy, difficulty concentrating, feeling of irritability, fatigued, withdrawn, self-medicating (drug or alcohol abuse), poor school performance, hyperactivity, nightmares, aggressive behavior, excessive worry, outbursts

of anger, long lasting depression, and complaints of physical illnesses, aches and pains (Frank).

Media and Stress

A major result of overexposure to stress is anxiety. Anxiety can be looked at as the feeling of fear when there is no apparent physical danger (Allen & Klein, 1996). Anxiety can be looked at in two different categories one being general anxiety or trait anxiety and situational anxiety (Allen & Klein). General anxiety is usually something that has been learned in childhood and becomes part of one's lifestyle (Allen & Klein). Situational anxiety is related to a specific event or activity (Allen & Klein). Overexposure to situational anxiety can sometimes lend itself to becoming habit forming.

One study has shown that children today compared to children from the 1950's are far more affected by stress and anxiety (Twenge, 2000). Some researchers have begun to refer to the present time as the "Age of Anxiety" (e.g., Twenge, 2000, p.1007). Twenge, reviewed research involving 40,000 college students and 12,000 children, aged 9-17, from a variety of backgrounds, between 1952 and 1993 (2000). The results showed an increase of nearly a full standard deviation in anxiety (Twenge). Results of the study show a direct link between the increase in environmental dangers and lack of social connectedness may be responsible for the growing anxiety concern (Twenge).

It is important to take a look at the different causes of the increase in stress and anxiety in today's children. Things such as environmental dangers (crime, community violence, AIDS, war, and terrorism), Family issues (separation, divorce, family dysfunction, verbal and physical abuse, illness, loss of family member), Economic Factors (parent's unemployment, poverty, homelessness), and school problems (poor

grades, learning disabilities, peer issues, and isolation) are just a few reasons why the stress and anxiety levels in children may be on the rise (Frank, 2003).

One possible cause of the exposure to environmental dangers is the increased access to media by children. Exposure to the television, the World Wide Web, radio, video games, and cell phone technology have contributed to breaking down the barriers of protecting today's children from the daily events in the world. One study showed the average 18 year old spent 16.000 hours in front of the television and less than 15,000 in a classroom (Allen & Klein, 1996). Another study has shown that one third of all television characters were involved in crime and/or violence in some way, either by fighting crime or committing it (Allen & Klein). Television exposes children to crime, violence, and murder ten times more than actually occurs in the real world (Allen & Klein). Children are also exposed to the "thirty minute miracle" where one's problems are solved in the time span of a short thirty-minute television show (Allen & Klein). Many children show resilience when faced with exposure to stressful events, and some children can have serious short and long-term psychological issues (Saylor et al., 2003). A major concern for children is that they lack the psychological capacity to completely comprehend the media coverage and could possibly be traumatized by the media exposure (Saylor et al.). According to Hanker, Whalen, and O'Neil (p. 776):

> Today's young people are barraged with worrisome messages- about
> their health, their behaviors, their environment, and their future. AIDS,
> fires, floods, shootings, sexual assaults, pesticides, and toxic waste- these
> and many other events are all to vividly portrayed through real-life and
> media exposure. It is almost impossible for children and adolescents to escape

knowledge of the violent, perverse and catastrophic events that seem to be occurring at increasing frequencies.

Stress in the Family

There are also many issues within a family unit that can add to the building stress in elementary children. Events such as divorce, separation, remarriage, financial changes, illness, and high expectations are just a few events that can negatively affect children within a family.

The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, more than a third higher than other countries (Berk, 2005). Researchers estimate that between 40% and 50% of first-time marriages from the 1990's will end in divorce (Amato, 2001). Divorce and separation not only are stressful on the couple involved, but also can have a major impact on the children involved as well (Woolfolk, 2007). The first two years after a divorce are often the most difficult for children to deal with (Woolfolk). Children will often exhibit problems in school, change in sleep patterns, loss or gain of weight, or experience other difficulties (Woolfolk). Many times children begin to blame themselves for the break-up of the family unit and will often hold onto unrealistic expectations that they can fix the "problems" (Hetherington, 1999). Divorce will often lead to many other changes in the family structure, such as change of home, change of employment, decreased time with parent(s), and sometimes more responsibility put on to the children (Woolfolk). Nearly two-thirds of parents who divorce from their first marriage will remarry, and out of the two-thirds half of the second marriages will end in divorce again (Nelson, 1993). The constant change in family structure can lead to uncertainty in children and increase stress levels.

Stress in children can also be caused by family financial strain. One in six American children lives in poverty, adding up to about 13 million children in the US alone (Woolfolk, 2007). According to Takeuchi, Williams, and Adair (1991) children who live in poverty for an extended period of time are at a greater risk for emotional and behavioral issues than those children who spend a short amount of time living in poverty. Children living in a long-term welfare family showed more behavioral difficulties and stress than those children whose families were able to exit the system (Takeuchi, Williams, & Adair, 1991). Parents under long-term financial stress will often exhibit signs of stress such as a decrease in physical health, decline in parental behavior, and marital stress, these effect are often felt by the children and can increase the stress that the child will feel (Takeuchi, Williams, & Adair, 1991). Poor children are almost twice as likely as non-poor children to be kept back in school (Woolfolk).

Another major contributor to stress in children is family expectations. Often parents unknowingly place a large amount of stress on their children by setting unrealistic expectations. Parents strive to make their child the best at what they are doing, without taking into consideration what their child is mentally and physically capable of (Allen & Klein, 1996). Parents may push too hard to make their child excel in sports or enroll their child in every activity possible, with little time for rest and relaxation (Bushnell, 2005). Children can also feel unnecessary stress when their own personal goals do not match the goals set for them by their parents and society (Bushnell, 2005). Society has also followed this trend of raising expectations for children and placing unneeded stress on today's children. As children grow so do the expectations set before them, and with that comes the increase in stress and anxiety (Allen & Klein).

Stress in the Schools

A seemingly obvious place where stress can manifest itself in children is in school. It is quite common for children to feel some form of stress, anxiety, and uneasiness in school at one time or another. The increase in the amount of homework, competition for good grades, fear of failure, peer-pressure and bullying are some of the more common reasons for stress in school (Allen & Klein, 1996). Anxiety over situations such as answering, and asking questions in class, attending social events, showing assertiveness, and being in front of peers can often times lead to avoidance of many different social situations, including school (Fisher, Masia-Warner, & Klein, 2004). Long-term avoidance of these situations can create behavior patterns that may interfere with developmental growth in adolescence (Albano, DiBartolo, Heimberg, & Barlow, 1995). The avoidance of these situations can also lead to other problems such as poor school performance, depression, and possible substance abuse (Fisher, Masia-Warner, & Klein).

Anxiety can be seen as a cause and effect of poor school performance. Students can be overwhelmed which causes anxiety, and then in turn their poor performance can produce more anxiety (Woolfolk, 2007). Anxiety can interfere with focusing attention, learning and test taking (Woolfolk). According Woolfolk (2007) highly anxious students feel the need to divide their attention between learning the new information being presented while worrying about the evaluation of the information being taught. Many highly anxious students have poor study skills, and if the information being presented is not done so in a well-organized manner the anxiety levels in these students may increase (Woolfolk). When it comes to testing, many students find it hard to demonstrate the

knowledge, due to "freezing-up" or lacking the skills necessary for effective test-taking (Naveh-Benjamin, McKeachie, & Lin, 1987). Children who are targets of peers' aggressive behaviors (bullying) are at higher risk for adjustment problems, including depression, anxiety, stress, low-motivation in school, loneliness, truancy, and dropping out (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

Helping Children Cope with Stress and Anxiety

The amount of stress that children today are faced with can seem overwhelming, however there is an upside to all of this, stress and anxiety is very treatable. There are steps that teachers and guidance counselors can take to help children to deal with their stress. There are many different therapies that are available to help children cope with stress, but there are also many simple techniques that can be taught to children to help them to deal with stress and anxiety in a proactive manner.

Some of the more well known therapies used to deal with stress and anxiety are Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, Family Therapy, and Person-Centered Therapy. Behavioral Therapy works just as it sounds; it is a process that helps the client to change their behavior which in turn will help to change their thought process. As the positive behaviors increase and strengthen the negative behaviors begin to diminish (Frank). One example of Behavioral Therapy would be the use of systematic desensitization, where a client is asked to face their fears head on, slowly at first until they feel comfortable enough to face the "feared" event/object with little stress and anxiety. The main focus in behavioral therapy is to allow exposure to the fear to be gradual; as the child becomes more comfortable with the exposure the fear lessens (Frank, 2003). Behavioral therapy is

one of the most commonly used and possibly one of the most effective therapies in dealing with stress and anxiety.

Cognitive Therapy is a therapy that involves the child's thoughts and beliefs. The child is taught to replace their negative and self-defeating thoughts with positive and encouraging thoughts. As stated by Frank (2003) "How a person thinks about a situation is often more significant than the event itself." This therapy uses the A, B, and C's: Activating event, beliefs, and consequences that directly relate our beliefs to our feelings or consequences of our actions. In Cognitive behavioral therapy the client is taught to identify negative thoughts and to replace those negative thoughts with positive thoughts, which in turn will help to replace the negative feelings.

Including the whole family unit in therapy can really influence changes in stress in anxiety in a child (Frank, 2003). Family Therapy involves the family members working together as a support system. Family therapy is generally based on improving communication skills within the family unit and working together to solve problems (Frank). Family members can either work to encourage the problem behavior (ie, stress and anxiety), or they can help to overcome the problem behavior (Frank). This therapy is most effective if the whole family supports the philosophy as well as the family member who is dealing with the stress and anxiety.

Finally, Person-Centered Counseling is a possible solution to dealing with stress and anxiety in children. Person-Center counseling is just that, it is counseling that is centered on the client. This therapy allows the individual to be heard, to be listened to and to "vent" about what is bothering them (Frank, 2003). Person-Centered therapy is a reflection of feelings, summarizing, clarifying, and asking open questions to encourage

sharing (Frank). According to Frank (2003), "an honest expression of feelings and problems is usually the first step in changing a situation for the better. Empathetic responses by a counselor or therapist help immensely, too."

There are many opportunities for teachers and counselors to help students learn how to deal with their stress in non-counseling situations. Allowing time for students to receive adequate exercise, time for relaxation, journaling, and giving structure-free time are just a few ways to help lessen the stress for children. Encouraging a stressed or anxious child to find a physical activity that they enjoy is an easy and effective coping strategy for teachers and counselors to implement. Exercise is a body's natural way of fighting stress and anxiety. According to Frank (2003), "When done on a regular basis, the child will benefit not only physically, but also emotionally." Even in dealing with a non-athletic child, finding an activity that keeps them moving and gets their blood pumping will help to take the edge off the their anxiety (Frank).

There are many techniques that can help children to attain relaxation, most relaxation techniques are economical, easy to teach, have a solid research base (Allen & Klein, 1996). Many relaxation techniques have helped to reduce the effects of stress in children (Allen & Klein). The first type of relaxation that may be used is progress muscle relaxation (PMR). PMR helps the student to focus on one muscle group after another, while switching back and forth between tension and relaxation in each muscle group from toes to head (Allen & Klein).

Active imagination is another widely used relaxation technique. "The key concept of active imagination is the belief that when people imagine themselves successfully performing a certain behavior, the likelihood for taking part in that behavior increases"

(Allen & Klein, 1996). Active imagination has been shown to reduce depression, stress, and anxiety, build positive attitudes, and influence feelings and behavior (Allen & Klein).

Encouraging journaling in and out of the classroom can help stressed and anxious children express themselves without being put in an even more stressful position. Recording events through out the day can help children to identify stress triggers and stress alleviators (Frank, 2003). Children can also feel the freedom to express themselves freely without their feelings being judged.

Many children feel over scheduled, so allowing for some free time can give children a "stress-free" break. Children need time to just be children so giving them free time to read a book, listen to music, or to just "veg-out" can be an easy stress reliever. Allowing time for activities that they enjoy and that they choose will help them to be more relaxed, since activities that they choose will most likely be low stress activities.

Though the causes and influences on children's anxiety and stress may seem overwhelming, there are many things that can be done by teachers and guidance counselors to help these children to better deal with their stress. With the increased educational requirements, and school standards the real issue seems to be how and when do we begin to help these children that are beyond their years in levels of stress? As teachers, and counselors we need to look at the impact that ignoring the situation would make on the future of these children. We would never ignore a child that was physically ill, so how can we turn our backs on a child who emotionally is not well? Making changes in our schools is not just a theory it is something we must do if we want to continue to help happy and healthy students through our schools.

Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

It appears as though childhood stress and anxiety is on the rise with little hope of a decline, unless some major steps are taken in the schools to prevent stress or effective coping skills are taught. As the daily demands grow for adults, it also grows for the children that we work and live with. Many adults do not deal with stress and anxiety in healthy/positive ways, so how can we expect our children to take on these stress-fighting roles in a healthy manner?

Awareness is the first step in helping these students to gain control over their stress and anxiety. Helping our students to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and then educate them on how to cope with the stress that surrounds them. Coping with stress and anxiety is a skill that is needed and can be used for a lifetime. The sooner we recognize the need for this type of action in our schools, the better off our students will be.

Recommendations

It appears as though stress and anxiety in elementary children is on the rise with no signs of it stopping. Parents, teachers, and society need to take a look at the long-term impacts of these high levels of stress on children and figure out a way to counter act them. High stress levels seem to be appearing in younger and younger children every year. What schools are doing now does not seem to be working, so they need to look at this problem from a new angle.

Schools often put too much of a push on testing and grades, which causes stress and anxiety in elementary children, and yet we don't take the time to stop and teach them how to deal with it properly. Making things like relaxation techniques, teaching

organizational skills, more physical education time, and counselors available in every school are some proactive ways to help children deal with the stress that they are faced with. We can't expect a child to deal with stress and anxiety properly if we never take the time to teach them. By starting at the elementary level we are giving the children a life-long skill as well as possibly saving them from a lot of extra stress and anxiety.

Although standards are important, all high standards do not have to be measured by a test. Our government constantly wants results of learning thorough test taking, and this is causing higher stress and lower levels of application of skills. It is far more important for children to show application of their learning than to be able to be masters of standardized test taking. The never ending test taking society that we have become has helped to increase stress levels in our school-children and has managed to allow for less teaching time. If we are going to continue to higher our standards for our children then we must also follow that with helping our children cope with the added pressures.

Areas for Further Research

Though this has been presented from a teacher and counselor perspective this is an issue that extends far beyond the school borders. The impact of stress and anxiety on children are lifelong worries and concerns. Society as a whole needs to take a look at its impact on children and what we can do to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety.

The majority of the journals that I reviewed looked at the cause of stress and anxiety in school-aged children and where it may have been generated. I also reviewed a few books that made some suggestions for dealing with stress and anxiety in children. I found that there was a significant gap in identifying stressful situations and helping children to cope with these situations. I would like to see some research done on pre and

post stressful events and what strategies appeared to work the best with children. A study that follows a group of children throughout their schooling careers that would document major events, major stressors, and overall outcomes of each situation would really help to give a clear picture of how each child is affected. I believe that this could even be done informally through journal writing, which is already a widely used classroom activity.

In further review I would also like to see schools take a more proactive approach in the challenge to help children overcome and/or cope with stress. I realize that teachers are already asked to teach far beyond the basic curriculum, but I believe that researching and testing the use of coping skills could only help teachers and students in the long run. It would be interesting to see if the output from the students would increase as coping skills are used.

I would also like to see if there is a strong correlation between having elementary counselors in a school and lower levels of stress and anxiety in the students. Most people seem to support the idea of a counselor being in the school system, however I am unaware of how much research has been done to show the true impact the counselor has the students he/she works with. I would like to personally conduct an informal inventory for my students to see if I have had any sort of impact on them positively or negatively in helping them to deal with the stressors and anxiety that are part of our everyday lives. I believe that an effective counselor can be a great support for the students as well as for the teachers, which may help to decrease stress levels.

<div align="center">Summary and Conclusion</div>

The purpose of this paper was to look at the causes of stress and anxiety in elementary children and what could be done by elementary teachers and counselors to

help alleviate some of the stress. While there are plenty of factors that increase the stress levels in elementary children, there are few strategies in place to help them to cope in a healthy manner.

Children today are faced with everyday stressful events such as overexposure to the media (war, extreme weather, terrorism, illness and death), family related issues (divorce, single parent families, addictions, illness and death), and school (the ever rising expectations, over scheduling, bullying, and peer pressure). Society has given our children adult sized problems to deal with, without giving them adult sized coping skills. Often times children take what they are presented with and internalize these problems, or deal with them in a harmful or hurtful way. We as a society need to begin to take a proactive approach to helping elementary children to deal with the everyday problems they are being faced with.

Since it is nearly impossible to remove most of the stressful events from the children's lives, we need to work together to teach them positive coping skills. Teachers and counselors as well as parents can implement simple things into everyday activities, things such as relaxation techniques, increased physical activity, healthy eating, daily journaling, and free time for kids to just be kids.

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