

Stress and the School-Aged Child



Under stress, under learning

All children experience stress and are often under more stress than we may think. The demands and expectations to achieve academically, socially and in extra-curricular activities can sometimes be overwhelming. Every child can benefit from learning strategies to cope more effectively with stress.

Excessive stress can have a dramatic effect on learning and social development. It can interfere with executive functions such as attention, memory, organization and integration. Over time, stress can cause damage to brain cells and shrink main memory structures.

Not only can too much stress have a negative effect on a student's ability to learn but it can also have a negative effect on their overall health.

"Our children and youth are experiencing increasing levels of pressure and stress at a younger and younger age."

Reaching for the Top: A Report by the Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth. Health Canada, 2007

What does stress look like in the classroom?

While many children are able to roll with the ups and downs of life, some struggle to maintain balance and focus. These struggles can sometimes manifest as "behavioural issues" in the classroom and beyond.

Difficult or annoying behaviour is often what we notice in children because it is visible and often requires a response. While the impact of stress may cause some students to act out, others may become unusually quiet, withdrawn and unresponsive.

It's important to look beyond behaviour and understand that many things may be happening inside the child that are causing them to act that way. For example, some students may be experiencing a range of physical, mental or emotional reactions to highly stressful situations in their lives, such as conflict between their parents or challenges keeping up with schoolwork.

School professionals can make a difference

Educators play a critical role in the lives of their students and in helping them to learn effective stress-management skills. By teaching and modeling key strategies, educators can support the development of self-regulation and promote effective stress management.

What can we do to reduce stress in the classroom?

There are a number of strategies that can help to minimize stress that may interfere with a student's ability to learn, have fun and get along with others. Try the following ideas to promote positive stress management and coping with students:

- Model flexible thinking and the positive voice by talking out loud about your own struggles with stress;
- Reframe problems as opportunities for learning and growth;
- Demonstrate calming and focusing by taking a few deep breaths, stretching, etc.;

By helping students learn positive coping strategies to deal with stress, you can build their resiliency and prevent stress from escalating to other issues such as anxiety.

Well-designed, universal programs to promote mental health and social and emotional well-being and learning can have a wide range of positive impacts, including increased academic achievement, and a reduction in anxiety and depression.

Dataprev Project, 2011 www.dataprevproject.net

The programs

With the help of educators, psychologists and stress experts from across the country, the Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) has developed a range of curriculum-linked stress management programs specifically for the classroom. These evidence-based programs are designed to help educators, parents and caregivers become more aware of childhood stress, and to help students develop effective strategies to deal with stress.

These programs include:

- **Kids Have Stress Too!® Preschool Program**
- **Kids Have Stress Too!® Tools and Activities for Classrooms Grades 1-3**
- **Stress Lesson®**
For Grades 4-6

"The best approaches to improving executive functions and school outcomes... address stresses in students' lives, attempting to resolve external causes and strengthen calmer, healthier responses."

Adele Diamond, 2010



Let's learn how to deal with stress.



Kids Have Stress Too!® (KHST!) Preschool Program

Provides a comprehensive introduction to key aspects of early childhood and brain development, as well as the crucial role caregivers and educators play in helping children learn effective stress-management strategies. Designed to meet the needs of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, the program contains evidence-based strategies to help young children learn how to become aware of and manage stress.

Kids Have Stress Too!® for grade 1-3 classrooms

Provides educators with strategies to help create an emotionally healthy environment in their classroom by promoting self-regulation and effective stress-management skills and strategies.

Stress Lessons® focuses on students ages 9-12

This program provides educators with practical, developmentally appropriate, engaging activities for grade 4-6 classrooms.

Do you know some of the signs of stress?

- Sore stomach
- Headache
- Forgetfulness
- Butterflies in stomach
- Can't concentrate
- Trouble sleeping
- All of the above

Program goals

- To support educators and students in learning how to recognize and deal with stress;
- To build students' capacity for self regulation;
- To provide educators with innovative ways of presenting required curriculum on social and emotional learning;
- To help create a calm, safe and stimulating classroom environment.

"Stress has an enormous impact on childrens' self-regulation. Self-regulation is increasingly being seen as key to successful learning in the classroom and beyond. Teaching students effective stress-management techniques can improve self-regulation and learning."

Stuart Shanker, 2012

What's included?

The programs feature:

- Skill-based activities ranging from 5-50 minutes in length that can be used in a variety of subject areas;
- Step-by-step lesson plans;
- Tips, facts and suggestions on how to extend or modify each activity;
- Supplementary materials such as videos and handouts.

For more information or to download resources, please go to www.psychologyfoundation.org

Maximizing effectiveness

The programs work best if they are introduced early in the academic year, so that the activities can be repeated and become incorporated into daily classroom practice.

Additionally, because stress is part of the school environment, classroom-based stress-management programs (such as Kids Have Stress Too!® and Stress Lessons®) need to be positioned within a comprehensive whole-school approach to mental health promotion.

We've listed a variety of helpful, evidence-based resources related to comprehensive, whole school approaches.

See them on our site at: www.kidshavestresstoo.org



It takes a village !

Although schools play a critical role in our children's lives and development, parents and caregivers can significantly impact the ways in which children manage stress and build resiliency. The Psychology Foundation of Canada has a companion program on childhood stress and additional resources for parents and caregivers.

For more information, please visit: www.psychologyfoundation.org



The mission of the Psychology Foundation of Canada is to share sound psychological knowledge to better people's lives. Please visit the website at www.psychologyfoundation.org for more information about our activities.

