

Stress and the Family

### 3. Growing Up Mentally Fit

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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How people deal with stresses during their adult years is determined to a great extent by what happens during infancy. Many scientific studies have shown how important early experiences are in influencing later behavior. It is not only *what* happens during the early days, weeks and months of life, but oftentimes what *does not* happen during this early period that is important. When infants are unable to cope effectively with the stresses of their lives, they sometimes show both psychological and physical growth difficulties.

During the early months of life, the human infant is totally dependent upon adults for survival. A baby is passive, dependent and lacks the resources for coping assertively with any kind of stress. In fact, the only signal a newborn infant has for showing stress reaction is crying, and the only mechanism available for eliminating that stress is to go off into a world of sleep. In a sense, all the unpleasantness is obliterated by this form of withdrawal. This can become a characteristic personality pattern for dealing with any kind of unpleasantness unless the infant is given help in reducing the unpleasant sensations during this time of great dependency. Infants subjected to long or frequent periods of stress do not become stronger and more effective in dealing with problems later on. Actually, they learn to use infantile methods for dealing with later stresses. These babies learn to "tune out" the world and turn into a fantasy world as a means for finding comfort from the unpleasant frustrations they experience. Everyone knows of some adult who, when faced with some unpleasantness, goes to sleep, drinks excessively or uses some other form of behavior to "tune out" rather than coming to terms with the problem and solving it.

An infant who is helped to cope with the stresses of infancy by competent and efficient parental care has a far greater chance of dealing independently with adult stresses later on than the infant who is left to his or her own devices.

The major stresses during infancy are brought about by the frustration of infantile needs. The needs of infants are greatly underestimated. Most people think that a newborn infant only requires food, a dry diaper and plenty of sleep. Many well-meaning parents after having met these needs find that the infant is still uncomfortable. They assume that, "The baby is crying for no reason." This is not true. Babies *always* cry for a reason. They are indicating a feeling of stress, even though we may not always know or understand the reason. Oftentimes, a crying baby will stop crying when picked up and carried about. Some babies stop crying when music is played, a mobile is provided to look at or they are given a sensation of touch or movement. Clearly, this indicates that the baby had a need for some form of stimulation and cried most likely out of boredom.

Believe it or not, newborn babies can become bored due to lack of what psychologists call "sensory stimulation." I prefer to call it "cuddling." When a baby is cuddled or picked up, a sense of visual stimulation is generally being provided (everything looks as if it is moving). The baby gets a sensation of movement from the balance mechanism in the brain. The baby is receiving a sense of touch and usually gets the pleasant, familiar sounds of the parent speaking. I have observed thousands of mothers and fathers of newborn babies who, when they pick up their baby, tend to rock back and forth, swing around, tap the baby's back, smile, talk and stroke the baby's head. Studies have shown that babies who are severely deprived of this kind of stimulation tend to withdraw from the world, lose eye-to-eye contact with people, engage in more self-stimulation by moving their hands in front of their faces in a somewhat bizarre fashion and show no real interest in people.

What all this adds up to is that infants and little babies who get cuddled a lot, whose parents try to meet all their needs during this period of great dependency, develop a sense of trust in others. Infants deprived of this kind of experience tend to lose trust in others and engage in very primitive behavior as a means of coping

with stress—they tend to go off to sleep, tune out the world or engage in activities by themselves without any awareness of the outside world. This latter group of babies shows less curiosity later on, fails to smile readily and generally shows difficulty in communicating with others.

Meeting an infant's needs in this way is considered by some people to be the same as "spoiling" the baby. I do not agree with this idea at all! I think parents have a natural inclination to react to a baby's cries by wanting to do something to eliminate the baby's discomfort. I encourage parents to follow through on this natural tendency and not give in to those friends, relatives and professionals who urge them to "let the baby cry it out." It is hard for parents to follow through on their desire to make their baby happy when people bombard them with this kind of advice or accuse the parent of being "neurotic" by wanting to pick up a crying baby. Others attempt to undermine a parent by saying, "Crying is good for the lungs!" That is ridiculous! Crying is no better for the lungs than bleeding is for the veins.

While I believe strongly in helping an infant during the first year of life to develop a sense of trust in others, I think it is equally important to help the growing human utilize his or her own resources as they develop. That is, as soon as the baby is old enough to pick up objects and throw them, or is able to crawl from one place to another, limits must be set. This starts around six months of age.

Prior to this time, the baby can do very little individually and requires the trusting parent to satisfy basic needs. Parents who spend little time with their children, or who are inconsistent in helping them learn "rules and regulations" during the second part of the first year of life when they are beginning to crawl from one place to another, may find that they do not respond to discipline. In the children's minds the reaction is understandable. After all, why should they care about the adult reaction when that adult was not available during the dependency stage when the children required help?

The baby who learns rules and regulations usually feels more secure and is capable of dealing with limits. By so doing, the child becomes socialized at an earlier age and, in turn, gains a great deal more freedom of movement. Moreover, the child has a greater sense of security and can usually deal with situations more effectively than the child who experienced a great deal of uncertainty during the time he or she lacked adequate mechanisms for coping.

When I speak of discipline, I do not mean punishment. Discipline represents rules and regulations that protect the rights and integrity of individuals. Punishment represents the price you pay for violating those rules. Babies and children enjoy discipline, contrary to the belief of many people. In fact, they are constantly exploring to find the limits of a situation and how far

they can go without eliciting a strong negative reaction from the people they love and need. They are not out to make the adult miserable; they are merely attempting to find the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not.

There are situations, of course, when children attempt to make the adults in their lives unhappy as a means of retaliating against them for neglect or unfairness. Some children will do this if they do not feel they are getting enough positive attention, and so they seek negative attention.

Being consistent and enforcing rules is not only a way of helping children cope with stress and build self-control, but it is a way parents have of showing love and concern for their child. Those parents who believe that setting limits may "frustrate the child's self-expression" may be causing their children to feel that their parents really don't care one way or another about them. I have found that children who do not learn to cope with rules at an early age, find it extremely difficult to handle their impulses in a socially acceptable way later on.

I hasten to add, however, that children require a great deal of freedom to explore, but that the areas of freedom require certain limits. It is precisely these limits that I refer to when I speak of discipline. If one sets limits that are too constricting, it can stifle a child's curiosity and make the child feel hostile, anxious or fearful.

Many parents are counseled by professionals to teach independence to babies right from the start. They are taught to set rules and regulations from the moment of birth onward and demand that the child conform to their expectations. Advocates of this idea generally recommend feeding a baby on a schedule, letting the baby cry it out and enforcing various other rules during the time when the baby is totally dependent. I am opposed to this recommendation simply because a baby at this stage of development is not ready to learn independence. You may be trying to teach independence, but the baby is learning distrust. The time to set rules is when the baby begins to move from one place to another or is able to manipulate objects. At this time, rules and regulations can be set, but in a way that is understandable to the infant without severe frustration or harsh punishment.

I think it is crucially important for parents to show respect for the integrity of babies and children to help them achieve a sense of self-esteem and the capacity to cope with frustration and stress. Honesty toward children plays an important role. The curiosity of a child will flourish naturally in a stimulating and enriching environment that offers protective rules and regulations. It can be stifled by inconsistency or by parents who are overbearing and constantly focus on the child's weaknesses rather than his assets and capabilities. The child who is emotionally secure will

find the social academic world interesting and challenging. The child who harbors feelings of fretfulness and uncertainty resulting from a lack of trust during the earlier stages in his life will show anxiety over separation, will tend to cling to the parents for long periods of time and, in general, will show difficulty in adjusting to new situations.

When a child goes off to school for the first time, whether it be nursery school or first grade, it represents stress. It is a major transition point for the child and parents should recognize the need for preparing the child not only for the pleasures and satisfactions that a school environment has to offer. They should understand that the child will experience anxieties about this new experience. Children are fearful about the reactions of the other children, the teacher and what will be going on at home while they are away; and they wonder if Mother or Father will return to pick them up.

For this reason, it is advisable for parents to make the transition gradually. Explain to the child what will happen, provide an opportunity to meet the teacher in advance and stay with the child for at least part of the time during the first day or days of school.

Many children show their reaction to school and other stresses by stuttering, bedwetting, nail biting, increased thumb sucking, nightmares, loss of appetite or even with physical complaints of headaches and stomachaches. Some children show an aversion to going to school if the stress is too great. If this occurs, it is important for the parent to contact the school to find out what is going on. I have discovered in many instances that the child really enjoyed school but was frightened by a bully in the class. If this is the case, some attempt should be made to eliminate that stress so the child doesn't "turn off" altogether about going to school.

Many of the major stress reactions for children center around school. School should provide an environment to gratify the child's curiosity about the world. School behavior is oftentimes the first indication of an emotional problem, or may be a way of communicating something to a parent. Recently, I saw a mother and father whose main complaint centered around their son's poor motivation in school. Psychological reports showed that he was quite bright and capable of dealing with the academic program. The father reported that the boy didn't seem to care about anything and would never put himself out for anyone. He had two younger siblings who were doing extremely well. The parents were constantly comparing their son's poor school performance with achievements of the other two children. This did nothing but increase the child's hostility toward his more successful siblings. These parents were at their "wit's end." They tried punishment and reward, but to no avail.

During my inquiry into the situation, I asked what their son talked about during meal time. The father said, "He just talks nonsense—it is not very important—he never seems interested in what we have to say." I urged the father to try hard to remember some of the things his son was trying to communicate at meal time. After much frustration on the part of the father, he reluctantly admitted that he did not remember, since he didn't even listen. The father, who was a very successful self-made man, not only ignored his son's conversation at the dinner table, but felt his own success was more important and this was the basis of most family conversation. The father set himself up as an example for his son, thereby depriving his son of any sense of individuality.

I suggested to the parents that perhaps their son was using his behavior to communicate the stress he was under and the dissatisfaction of his life. I pointed out that what their son had to say was probably very important to *him*, and little recognition was given to his individuality. It became clear that the parents spent more time criticizing their youngster than they did complimenting him. They focused more on his liabilities than on his assets. Their son finally gave up and decided, "What's the use—they don't listen to me, they don't care about what I am able to do, so why try at all?!"

The point is that it is crucially important for all children to have the kind of meaningful relationship with parents that lets them know their parents really care and that the child is foremost in the parents' lives.

It is not necessary to provide material benefits, beyond necessities, in order for a child to gain emotional security and be better equipped to cope with the stresses later on in life. It is important for the parents to show a sincere interest in the child's individuality in a way that helps the child learn to function up to his or her potential in the demands of everyday life.

Parents should be fair with their children and answer their questions honestly and at a level the child can understand. Every effort should be made to help prepare the child for unpleasant situations and, with the assistance of the parents, to help the child gain a sense of mastery by coping. Parents who push their children beyond their capabilities, parents who hold out unreasonable expectations for the child's achievement, parents who force their children to live lives that represent their own unfulfilled expectations, not only deprive their children of the pleasures of life and an opportunity to gain emotional security, but weaken the child's capacity to deal with the stresses that are bound to occur later on in life.

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*1P-10M-8:76-UP, Price 10 cents, Single Copy Free*

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Michigan State University Printing