

THE CHILD HEALTH CONNECTION, INC.

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EFFECTS OF STRESS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How often do we hear the statement, “this child has behavioral issues?” Too frequently we are quick to label a child with one of the many maladies, i.e. ADHD, Asbergers, Autism, etc., that are prevalent in today’s world, and can effect children’s social and emotional development. Because these conditions have come to the forefront in recent years, it is easy to point in this direction when there are behavior concerns in the classroom. However, very often we have but to look at the child’s everyday environment to see if there are circumstances that are contributing to these behavioral patterns.

Stress has always been a normal part of childhood. First experiences in classroom settings, making friends, learning about the world around them and simply living in and being part of a family, are all examples of the normal stresses of growing up. But, there are additional stressors that children face today. While not every stressor is problematic, each has an additive effect that can eventually make life more difficult for children. Divorce and/or remarriage in the family, violence and sexual themes on television, and the increased pressures of schooling are examples of potential stressors.

The combination of normal and extra stress is making it difficult for many children to deal successfully with aspects of their social/emotional development. If stress is allowed to build, most children eventually reach a point of feeling overwhelmed, and developmental progress suffers, which can result in acting out behavior.

STRESS FACTORS

- **Family Circumstances:** The more common stressors faced by today’s children are divorce and exposure to multiple father/mother figures in a single parent household. Remarriage as well as two-career families are other examples of family situations that can cause children stress. For example, a young child in a two-career family may experience “overload” from being shuttled between early morning care, school, and late afternoon supervision.
- **Early Pressure to Excel:** Many well-meaning parents inadvertently put stress on their children by involving them in too many extracurricular activities. While some young children benefit from early musical experiences,

competitive sports programs, and computer camps, more often these experiences add stress to their lives.

- **Media Stress:** For a variety of reasons, television is a stressful media experience for children. One reason for this stress is that young children have difficulty separating fact from fantasy and therefore struggle to understand and cope with the violence and sexual themes they regularly encounter. Movies, popular music, and even some children's books have also been cited for their stressful impact on children.
- **Child Abuse and Neglect:** Parents and families under stress may react in a very inappropriate way towards children. Physical abuse in the form of beatings, sexual relations between family members, and blatant neglect may result. As an adult working with young children, you need to be aware of the symptoms of abuse and neglect and be prepared to report this to the proper authorities.

EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- Physical and verbal aggression
- Noncompliance/Defiance
- Self injury
- Disruptive vocal/motor responses (screaming, jumping, running, throwing)
- Destruction of property
- Withdrawal
- Infants and toddlers may exhibit attachment difficulties, sleeping/eating difficulties, excessive crying and difficulty in soothing.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS AND OTHER AGENCIES

Serious behaviors seldom resolve themselves without systematic intervention. Usually children progress through a predictable course of ever-escalating challenging behaviors. Determining if environmental stress factors may be causative agents by partnering with parents to examine home environment issues is a good starting point. It is important to work together to examine situations that may be contributing to a child's stress and resultant behavior. Openly communicate your concerns with parents regarding their child's social and developmental setbacks and acting out behaviors that you have observed. It is helpful to keep a log of observed behaviors. Include time of day (to address any consistency, i.e. before lunch, nap time, on the playground, etc.). Also note any circumstances that may have precipitated outbursts. Share this information when you meet with parents to discuss your

concerns. Once parents are onboard with further evaluation of behaviors, resources can be made available to families.

If therapy/counseling sessions are recommended, committing to promotion and intervention of recommended practices in the classroom and home are a must to positive outcome. Follow through with *consistent* intervention practices, and decreasing perceived stressors in all of the child's environments, i.e. home, classroom, grandparents, child care, etc., is needed to successfully support a child's growth and development.

There is no single intervention practice that addresses all behavioral and developmental issues. However, we can work together to determine appropriate resources and approaches. Certainly determining environmental stress factors that may be contributing to the child's issues is a very good place to start.

Resources

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University. *Supporting Children's Social Emotional Development and Addressing Challenging Behavior.*

<http://education.com>. *Stress as a factor in social and emotional development.* Author, M.L. Henniger, July 2010.