



Pressure points

FROM MEDIA OVERLOAD TO PERFORMANCE ANXIETY, TODAY'S KIDS ARE TOO STRESSED.

Words **JULIE SAETRE**

This is the second in a series of articles exploring stress among today's kids. The first story, "Stress Test," appeared in the March 2018 issue of Kiwanis magazine and explored how stress impacts a young person's brain. It can be found online at kiwanismagazine.org.

Katie Hurley knows the routine. Every fall, as a new school year begins, so do the calls: parents seeking help for their stressed-out kids.

"Within a month, my phone is ringing off the hook," says the child and adolescent psychotherapist from Los Angeles, California, and the author of "The Happy Kid Handbook." "And it's not just high schoolers who are experiencing stress. Elementary school students are experiencing high levels of stress."

It's a trend that has increased markedly over the past few decades. The Royal Society for Public Health in London, England, reports that rates of anxiety and depression in young people have risen 70 percent in the past 25 years — a development that often leaves adults puzzled. What, they wonder, could be so stressful about growing up today?

"One thing I hear over and over from this generation of parents is, 'I dealt with it. I got over it. I turned out fine,'" Hurley says. "They're not taking into account

that life was very different in 1975 or 1985."

Why is modern life making our kids so anxious — and, just as importantly, what can we do to help?

It turns out the answers to both questions are rooted deeply in childhood. While stressors indeed start early, so does one effective antidote: play.

Not surprisingly, today's youth get stressed over some of the same things we do: pressure to succeed, crazy-busy schedules and the stranglehold of technology. The difference is that we didn't face

these aggressors as early as preschool. That's when today's kids start getting the message that you're either all-in or all-out.

"It's become this pressure cooker for very young kids, where they learn that the way to succeed in life is to be high achievers," Hurley says. "And they're suffering."

Parents expect their offspring to be reading by preschool graduation. A kindergarten class is followed by tutoring sessions to advance reading and math skills. And by grade school?

"It's not unusual for us to see children who are in grades three, four, five worried about whether they're getting the grades they need to get into college and university," says Michele Kambolis, a child and family therapist from Vancouver, British



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KATIE HURLEY, ADOLESCENT PSYCHOTHERAPIST, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Columbia, and author of “Generation Stressed.”

To up their chances, kids take on more and more responsibilities: music lessons, sports training, art classes, study sessions.

“They’re stacked with activities,” says Hurley. “I don’t have a single kid in my practice who has one day where they have nothing (scheduled).”

Should a quiet moment emerge amidst all that rushing around, technology steps in to fill the gap. But while a quick browse of Instagram can be fun, seeing all those photos of friends raising trophies, winning recitals and scoring game-winning goals only feeds the constant pressure to achieve.

“They see what other teens are doing and feel that they need to keep up,” Kambolis explains. “They don’t see the difficulty, the struggle, the anxiety, the stress, the sleepless nights. They see images of success and perfection.”

Thanks to our 24/7 news cycle, they also see a whole lot of disturbing stuff. When a teen gunman opened fire at a Florida

high school this past February, students inside posted videos of classmates screaming in fear while shots thundered in the hallway. Any time a jet crashes, an epidemic breaks out or a world conflict escalates, kids’ phones light up with alerts.

“The minute something happens, we know, and we take on those emotions,” says Hurley. “Twenty years ago, our kids weren’t privy to every single thing that happens on the news. Today they are. The landscape of fear has changed.”

That’s leading to a new wave of separation anxiety among youth. Two decades ago, Hurley would see one or two kids a year who refused to go to school. Today, it’s a constant issue.

“People think that separation anxiety is this thing that happens to babies, and they grow out of it. But separation anxiety disorder is different,” Hurley says. “When you ask a kid with separation anxiety disorder what they’re afraid of, they’re afraid that mom or dad is going to die on their way to work.

Or they’re afraid that they’re going to die while they’re in school. It’s a very real fear of death and loss.”

Technology also has led to a more insidious form of torment. The “mean girl” dynamic no longer stops when the school day ends. Online bullying follows the student home via social media, email and texts. The Royal Society for Public Health study found that seven out of 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying.

“If a child is being bullied online or through social media, it’s so public and reaches so many other youth that it can be emotionally devastating,” Kambolis says. “The soft signs of bullying also come up through social media — seeing their friends together when they haven’t been invited. It reinforces a sense of inadequacy.”

But what about the positive side? Getting lots of likes on a Twitter or Instagram post makes someone happy, right? Well, yes, but. ...

“Technology generally can be highly addictive,” explains Kambolis. “When we put out information and get an immediate



Release valve

POSITIVE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO HELP RELIEVE A CHILD'S ANXIETY.

When it comes to kids and stress, little irritations add up in a big way. Whether it's a taunt by a classmate or a disappointed sigh from a teacher, kids feel the pressure. "From the minute they leave for school, they might experience 20 to 50 micro-stressors a day that really pile on," explains child and adolescent psychotherapist Katie Hurley.

The good news is that if your club works with young people, you can use simple tools to help relieve some of that anxiety. Try these tips:

- **Make a stress thermometer.** Print a picture of a thermometer and fill it with colors ranging from blue (cool and calm) to red (emotional overload). Ask kids what shade represents their current stress level and what happened to make it that way. "Kids don't understand how anxiety and stress really affect them," Hurley says. "It's a great way to help kids start to pinpoint their stress points."
- **Introduce muscle relaxation.** Ask kids to tense a set of muscles (shoulders, arms, hands, feet) for 10 seconds and then release for 10 seconds. Repeat a few times to calm the mind/body system.
- **Encourage gratitude.** Invite kids to say or write three good things about their day. "When we teach children how to focus on what is working and what they're grateful for," says child and family therapist Michele Kambolis, "it encourages a more positive, resilient mindset."
- **Teach positive self-talk.** "When children are stressed, it's not unusual to hear them say things like 'I'm dumb,' or 'Nobody likes me,'" says Kambolis. "We can teach children ... that they can change those thoughts to ones that are more empowering ... so 'I'm dumb' turns into 'I know about a lot of things. I'm really smart.'"

(favorable) response, it increases the neurochemicals in the (brain's) reward center. We now have kids who are then highly distracted. Technology is crowding out activities that are really critical to holistic development — face-to-face connections, time outside, physical activity — and interferes with our ability to function."

Fighting back against the stress trifecta of achievement anxiety, over-scheduling and technological difficulties is a tall order. One key lies in what used to be a cornerstone of childhood: play. And no, that doesn't mean sitting in front of a gaming console.

At Vancouver's Harbourside Family Counseling Centre, where

Kambolis serves as clinical director, the playroom is well-stocked with kid-friendly finds: clothes for playing dress-up, art supplies, puppets. But when a young patient walks into her practice for the first time, the question Kambolis usually hears is, "Do you have any video games?"

"When they find out I don't, they really struggle to figure out what to do with the material," she says. "It's almost like I have to re-teach children how to play. That worries me a lot."

That's because old-fashioned, unstructured play is essential to a child's well-being.

"It's fundamental to good development and, ultimately, a more resilient and 'handling stress better' kind of life," says Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of The National Institute of Play in Carmel Valley, California.

The not-for-profit Institute serves as a clearinghouse for research on play, a topic Brown first began to explore through a study of young men who had committed homicide, including Charles Whitman,

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MICHELE KAMBOLIS, CHILD AND FAMILY THERAPIST, VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

known as the Texas Tower Sniper for his role in a 1966 mass killing.

“The play histories of the murderers and those who were matched (in a control group) were vastly different,” Brown says. “Most of the homicidal individuals were isolated, abused, impoverished — there were a lot of variables. But when you sum them up, the accessibility of enrichment through play was missing. What little kids do, if they’re given the opportunity and they’re halfway well-fed and not stressed, they play. And if they don’t, there appears to be some real difficulty in socialization and oftentimes in their coordination and bodily function.”

While Brown studied extreme cases, every child — even those with loving parents and a stable, secure life — needs the benefit of play, say the experts.

“If a child were to go through their day with a lack of play time, that would be a child who could not thrive,” Kambolis says. “It’s truly a basic requirement of a healthy childhood.”

“Free, unfettered, unstructured play is actually the best opportunity for kids to work things through, like conflict resolution and worries and fears,” adds Hurley. “They’ll use play to really work through something that scares them or something that upsets them.”

For example, a child who frequently needs attention for an ongoing medical issue might re-create a physician’s office or emergency room and use dolls to process her experiences. Or a child facing difficulty at home might grab stuffed animals to model interaction between a mother and son.

“(Unstructured play) helps children to use their imagination in ways where they’re expressing and exploring their sense of self,” Kambolis says. “It allows them a way to metabolize stressors and strong emotion. Not only that, but play is empowering. Play is an environment where children can be in control in a world where most of what they’re doing is being controlled by others.”

Play can take many different forms, depending on a child’s

needs and temperament, say the experts. Some children benefit best from a free-spirited romp outside with other kids, whether at the playground, the park or their own backyard. Others thrive on more quiet, thoughtful activities — writing stories, drawing pictures or building models.

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t fly, and play shouldn’t end when the tween and teen years begin, Brown adds.

“Not everybody plays the same way, whether you’re in elementary school or older. Getting into a ‘state of play’ is really fundamental, however a kid does that. The more you play in general, the higher performing you are, the more engaged you are, the more persevering you’ll be. And the more fulfilled, the less irritable.”

Unless, that is, the play involves video games, Kambolis cautions.

“Video games activate the stress response in our children. They activate the sympathetic nervous system and increase cortisol and epinephrine and stress chemicals.

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They’re actually stressing our children’s organ systems. When we’re not incredibly cautious about how we use technology, it can actually interfere with development.”

Beyond that restriction, though, play can be as elaborate or as simple as a child wants to make it. And parents don’t need to break the budget by buying out the town’s supply of educational toys or the latest best-selling sensation.

“You can buy all the fancy toys you want and you can have the perfect playroom full of stuff, but the things that kids like most of all are cardboard boxes and tape,” Hurley says. “They like to make their own things. They like to build their own blocks and build their own castles and make their own stuff out of nothing.”

And, as difficult as it might be, adults need to resist the urge to guide play in a particular direction. Let kids test their own limits and boundaries, advises Hurley. Eliminating all risks now actually contributes to more stress down the road.

“We all need to know what we’re made of and what we’re capable of,” she says. “We’ve been raising a generation of kids who look adults in the eye and say, ‘I don’t know if I can do that. Do you think I can do that?’ Twenty years ago, they just went for it. Now we have risk-adverse kids. It’s never really a mystery when a college sophomore ends up on my doorstep because he can’t cope anymore. All along, somebody paved a perfectly smooth path, where he never got hurt, never failed, never struggled. And everything was easy, until he got out on his own.” □