

He Who Laughs Last, Lasts!
Helping Your Gifted Child Cope with Stress
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In 1981, SENG established guidelines for SENG Model Parent Support Groups (SMPGs). SMPGs bring together groups of interested parents of gifted and talented children to discuss such topics as motivation, discipline, stress management, and peer relationships. This column offers information and advice based on the experience of trained SMPG facilitators, both to apply in their own parent groups and for other parents to use and learn from. Learn more about the SMPG program at http://www.sengifted.org/smpg_parent_groups.shtml.

Week Five of the SENG Model Parent Groups includes not only the topics of intensity and perfectionism, but also the topic of stress. We already know that gifted children experience life with more depth, complexity, and intensity. Stress is no exception to this rule. The stress of our gifted children is as complex and intense as that of any gifted adults. Gifted children tend to have a sense of adult responsibility for situations over which they have no control. Because of their multipotentiality, they may see multiple choices but struggle over which one to choose. A particularly powerful quote from *The Iceman Cometh*, cited in chapter six of *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*, illustrates this: "I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question....until in the end it is all questions and no answers." Add to this equation normal stressors such as family illness, divorce, and loss, then multiply it by the gifted child's asynchronous development, and we have a formula for potential risk of anxiety, meltdowns, and depression.

Stress is a normal part of life. Managing stress is not a process in which we rid ourselves of all stressors; instead, we learn best how to cope with and use stress to our advantage. Poorly managed stress can result in clouded thinking, reduced concentration, and impaired decision making. It can lead to forgetfulness and loss of ability to focus on a task. Under these conditions, gifted children perform less well and are more stressed by any perceived failures, and the stress cycle

begins again. In order to break that cycle, gifted children must learn how to cope with stress at a very early age. Here are some ways to help your gifted child cope with stress.

1. Help your gifted child to identify the stressor.

Help your child name the stressor and the feelings that accompany the stress. You may need to reflect what you are seeing and hearing from children to assist them with this. "It seems that you are worried about the audition for violin first chair position?" A casual question may help them name their stress and identify the accompanying feelings.

2. Encourage the gifted child to practice relaxing.

It is very difficult to use relaxation in the height of stress if it has not been practiced first in times of calm. Dr. James Webb recommends trying deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and visualization exercises. These strategies must be taught and practiced in order for them to be effective in times of stress. Dr. Carol Stripp recommends helping children to participate in relaxing activities outside of their areas of giftedness, such as bird watching, hiking, sailing, cooking, etc.

3. Assist your gifted child to reframe by seeing problems as opportunities.

Help your children to see that each new problem is a new challenge, and that there is something to be learned from every experience. Author Richard Bach writes in *Illusions* that "there is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek

problems because you need their gifts." Allen Klein wisely advises in *The Healing Power of Humor*, "We can begin to see the advantage in the disadvantage when we focus on the lesson (the gift) instead of the loss." Remember the example of Thomas Edison, who took over one thousand tries to discover which filament to use for the incandescent light bulb. "You have failed a thousand times," his critics cried. "Not at all," answered Edison. "What I have done is to discover a thousand materials that don't work."

4. Support your gifted child in taking action. Earl Hipp calls this taking charge of your life. He recommends that gifted children learn to "write your own script." When confronted by a challenge, he recommends the following steps for gifted children:

- Write a goal statement.
- Make a list of steps leading to the goal.
- Make a list of roadblocks and a plan for getting around them.
- Make a list of resources to help you achieve your goal.
- Develop criteria that will help you measure your progress.

If gifted children are not ready to take action directly on the stressor, it is still important to take action. That may include ignoring the stressor temporarily and doing something completely

unrelated. A healthy unrelated activity is physical exercise. Physical activity can redirect the mind and relieve the physical symptoms of stress.

5. Most importantly, help your gifted child see the humor. Humor comes from the creative side of our brain. Using humor can generate the creativity we need to have new insight and develop possible solutions to our problems. Learning to laugh in difficult situations is a skill. Learning to laugh at ourselves is a gift that keeps us in balance and keeps stress at bay. Use of jokes, exaggeration, irony, and word play are all stress busters for the gifted child. "*Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.*" - Mark Twain

If, after implementing the above strategies, your child is still experiencing physical and emotional problems due to stress, enlisting the help of a professional is warranted. Dr. Steven Curtis advises, "When you decide to seek help, make sure you choose a professional that has the training and experience consistent with the concerns you have. Don't just blindly pick a caregiver that a neighbor or friend recommends. Do your homework, and pick the right one. Do not be afraid to ask questions. It is best if the chosen professional has some experience and knowledge of working with gifted children."

References

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- Curtis, Steven. "Does Your Child Need Profession Help?"
http://www.sengifted.org/articles_counseling/curtis_does_your_gifted_child.shtml
- Hipp, Earl. *Fighting Invisible Tigers: Stress Management for Teens* (Free Spirit Publishing, 2008), pp. 80-81
- Klein, Allen. *The Healing Power of Humor* (Tarcher/Putnam, 1989), p. 148
- Stripp, Carol and Gretchen Hirsch. *Helping Gifted Children Soar* (Great Potential Press, 2000), p. 172
- Webb, James T., Janet L. Gore, Edward R. Amend, and Arlene R. DeVries. *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children* (Great Potential Press, 2007), page 142

Additional SENG Resources

- Patel, Vidish. "Stress Management and Gifted Children"
http://www.sengifted.org/articles_parenting/patel_stress_management.pdf
- Schuler, Patricia. "Gifted kids at risk: Who's listening?"
http://www.sengifted.org/articles_social/Schuler_GiftedKidsAtRiskWhosListening.pdf