

# **Stressed To Breaking Point – Why Our Children Are Stressed, And What We Can Do About It**

By Gemma Smith

In 2010, the American Psychological Association conducted a survey on 'Stress In America' [1]. The results did not make heartening reading. It transpires that one in eight American youths are affected by anxiety, and many teens experience near-constant stress levels on a par with or above those [2] experienced by adults. According to our cultural ideals, childhood is supposed to be a time of joy and freedom from the pressures of adulthood. So why are so many of our children wasting their youths on stress and anxiety?

## **Modern Stressors**

Many reasons have been put forward [3] for the burden of stress on modern children. It is certainly true that our young people are under an extraordinary amount of pressure. American culture is inherently competitive, and teaches that the 'good enough' is not good enough – one must be the best. Children are therefore under immense pressure to perform well at school. In many respects this is a good thing – high achievement helps children later in life. However, it also piles on massive amounts of stress [4] at a time in their life, which is naturally fairly anxiety-inducing anyway. The rigors of puberty, and the complex machinations of school kid society also take an immense toll on young people's emotional equanimity. However, many of the major stressors cited in cases of teen anxiety are domestic. Family dysfunction can have a profound effect upon our children, and stress is not something to be taken lightly. It can be incredibly damaging, and affect sufferers for the rest of their lives if experienced at a formative age. This is just one of many reasons why struggling families need to take extra care of their children.

## **The Harm Done By Stress**

There is absolutely no doubt at all that chronic stress is bad for the health. Stressed people are susceptible to cardiovascular disease, to weight gain, to depression, to gastrointestinal problems, to headaches, exhaustion, and cognitive decline to name but a few. But the impact it can have on mental health if experienced during the formative years can often be far more troubling. If a child grows up stressed, the chances are that their psyche will 'imprint' upon stress as the norm – drastically reducing their psychological ability to ever relax and live a stress-free life. They'll also be much more vulnerable to mental health issues like depression, and are likely to suffer from low self-esteem.

Some may learn to express their stress through anger and violence, which is not by any means a healthy coping strategy to develop, and could put their school careers at risk. Finally, stress in the young is strongly associated with 'health-risk behaviors' such as undertaking reckless physical challenges, drinking, and doing drugs. Clearly it is imperative that we do all we can to reduce stress amongst our young people.

### **Family Drama**

When a family is experiencing problems, it is all too easy to assume that the children are either unaware of the situation, or that it does not matter to them. We do not want the added complication of explaining our problems to our children, so we fool ourselves that everything is fine in their world. However, children are incredibly perceptive – a lot more so than the adult world likes to think [5]. They are almost certainly aware that there are problems, and they are actually more likely to be stressed by these problems if they don't understand them than if they do. Neglect won't help – engagement will. Remember, while you are able to escape to the outside world, for a child, the family IS the world – there's no escaping it for them and, if it's not up to scratch, then stress is likely to be a constant in their lives. Treat them with respect, don't assume that they're ignorant, and certainly don't neglect them in the case of domestic troubles.

[1] American Psychological Association, "[Stress In America](#)", 2010

[2] Jonel Aleccia, "[Teens More Stressed-Out Than Adults, Survey Shows](#)", NBC, Feb 2014

[3] Raychelle Lohmann, "[Back to the Basics: De-Stressing Today's Teen](#)", Rehabs, Oct 2014

[4] Patti Neighmond, "[School Stress Takes A Toll On Health, Teens And Parents Say](#)", NPR, Dec 2013

[5] John Cloud, "[What Do Kids Know? More Than You Think](#)", Time, Aug 2010