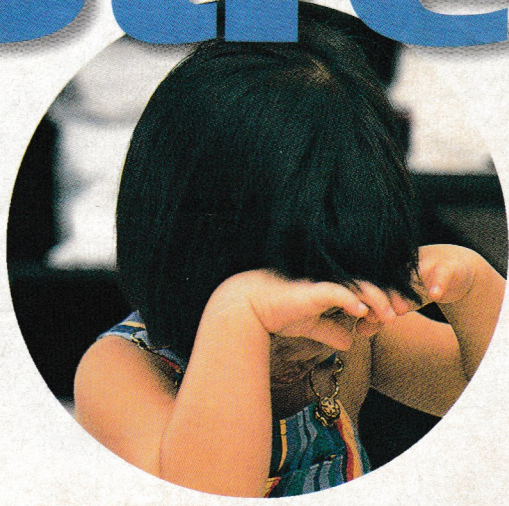


Stressful Situations



CONSTANCE LEOW interviews Carolyn Kee, a psychologist who specialises in child psychology.

Six year old Amy couldn't understand why the teacher made her stand in front of the class and promptly gave her a slap on her right hand with the dreaded ruler. The pain from the ruler was mild compared to the embarrassment she felt when the sea of faces started to laugh at her. Confused and agitated, Amy aggravated the situation when she told her classmates to stop. It was Amy's first week at primary one and she had just received her punishment for talking in class.

The change in Amy was generally unnoticed by her parents, both working professionals with demanding careers. She became reticent and withdrawn, picking at her food and offering monosyllabic answers to questions about school. In contrast, her younger sister, Allen, was chirpy and bubbly about the latest lesson learnt at play school. Dismissing her moodiness as a "period of necessary adjustment", Amy's parents continued to be oblivious to their daughter's plight.

The transformation from a childcare centre to a primary school is markedly a giant leap for any young child. The difference in the environment, expectation and attention cannot be undermined. At the childcare centre, the number of children is comparatively smaller and the ratio between teacher

and student is definitely higher. Once the child makes a successful change – and many do – the pressure to cope is less intense and the fear diminishes.

What Is Stress

But what about the growing percentage of children who just can't cope? Five-year-old Cindy would often complain of a headache just before her father sent her off to tuition. The "illness" would strangely subside when she was allowed to stay home. Headache, sore throat and stomachache are just some symptoms of a person undergoing stress. They vary from mild to severe and sometimes the symptoms manifest themselves to be rather visible, like throbbing at the temples.

Stress, per se, isn't bad, says one school of thought. In fact, a bit of stress may act as a form of impetus to drive us to maximise our potential. In contrast, another school of thought believes that the absence of stress can lead one to be self-indulgent, lazy and narcissistic. Biding one's own time and pleasure, sloth is inevitable.

Regardless of which advocate you're inclined to, stressful situations are to be reckoned with. To deny they exist either by postponing appropriate actions to address the problem or hoping it would just "go away" is counterproductive and damaging to one's health.

Experts recommend relaxation techniques; communication, exercise; humour and if need be professional help and medication as some of the more common stress management techniques. While the possibilities of reducing stress for the adult seem endless, just how appropriate are these methods to our children?

The Demands On Children

Many parents blame the education system to be the catalyst for the highly stressed state of their children. To what extent is this a fair statement, I asked Carolyn Kee, a psychologist with the Institute of Mental Health.

"I wouldn't say that's completely true. Certainly there are a lot of children who are very stressed and pressured to excel in school but there are children who fall short of expectation yet able to function well and have a healthy self-esteem; and lead a relatively happy life.

"If a child is subject to lots of school demands and the need to do well, we have to first realise that there are children who do not fall into that range of ability to achieve such a level.

"Attitude, i.e., societal attitude, parental attitude and perhaps the attitude of teachers and peers around the child have an influence on how a child thinks or feels. The people around them must help them realise

Often, adults overlook them because many still don't believe that children are capable of being depressed.

that they can survive and make something of themselves despite lacking these qualifications.

"While it's true that academic can open doors, there is a need to be open about the possibility of achievement in other areas. The child picks up our attitude – the optimism, hope and confidence or the lack of it. If you think that a degree is the end all, the child will adopt such a mindset.

"If the child starts to think that he's a failure and a hopeless case, he won't be motivated any more and can't see any other possibility for him except failure. He will refuse to do work and give up easily. Such children have so much frustration that they've developed an aversion to work. The interest and motivation, as I mentioned earlier, is lost."

A Positive Attitude

To overcome or prevent this from happening, Carolyn suggests the following:

- Learn to appreciate your child's effort and talent. The genuineness comes across when you praise him for his concerted contribution to a project.
- Learn to enjoy the child for himself. Make the child feel he means something in this world and not as someone who's here to do well or be clever, but one who's enjoyed for being himself.
- While it's important to make long-term plans for your children, we have to understand that the child sees everything as short-term. Do not to neglect the fun element in learning.

Striking The Balance

"A lot of children aren't as verbal as they are physical. I would encourage parents to build a good relationship with your children. Talk to them and listen to what

they have to tell you. By listening, I don't mean offering advice; rather, encourage them on to speak up by asking questions. Another important point to remember is to accept what the child says. For example, if the child says he hates his sister, don't be too judgmental by telling him it's not right. Rather, ask him why he feels that way."


Symptoms To Note

Last month, a boy in the UK took his life after his teacher confiscated his toys in school. His parents reported that the boy threatened suicide after his Pokemon cards were taken from him. In a letter written by the 10 year old, he said, "They are bullies. I just want to die, I'm going to hang myself."

It takes a trained eye to recognise the symptoms of a depressed child. Often, adults overlook them because many still don't believe that children are capable of being depressed. The problem is further compounded by reticent children who do not articulate their feelings or guise them as hyperactivity.

This is not an exhaustive list but the more common symptoms of depression are:

- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Feeling fearful and tensed
- Feeling tired
- Feeling restless and fidgety, pacing about
- Feeling angry and irritable
- Feeling antisocial, doesn't talk to other children
- Crying and feeling sad
- A sudden drop in academic performance

If you identify these symptoms in your child, have a talk with him to find out what's wrong. If all fails, you could do good to seek professional counselling for your child. 

The Question Of Medication

Medication is an important part of treatment for some problems like clinical depression. Other cases include some ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive) children who need drugs to calm them down so that they respond better to the behavioural treatment."

For some ADHD children, they can't control themselves in spite of reinforcements or setting limits. The urge for them to move is so strong; they can't control it. It can be a long-term prescription, a drug to help them cope for a few hours. But of course, we hope that with time, they'd be able to control themselves and do without any medication."

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