The Challenges of Childhood Stress

Linda Lunsted, LMSW
Serene Pathways Counseling, LLC
www.serenepathwayscounseling.com
llunsted@serenepathwayscounseling.com
Introductions:
• I received my degree from Michigan State University. I have over 24 years of experience as a clinical social worker providing therapeutic services for individuals, children, families, couples and groups.

My background includes:
• Substance Abuse Prevention, Education, Counseling.
  - DUI Classes, Intensive Outpatient Treatment, Residential Treatment
• Parenting classes
• Substance Abuse Program Development and Coordination
• Children’s Protective Services – Prevention, Investigation and Foster Care
• Strong Families/Safe Children Program Coordination
• St. Vincent Catholic Charities – Family Mental Health Clinic and Intensive Foster Care Therapist
• Private Practice since 2006
Overview

• Psychological needs/Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
• Developmental stages – Normal/Abnormal
• What stresses children out?
• Economic Climate
• How does technology and media impact stress differently today?
• Challenges for Childcare Providers
• Importance of play
• What can you do?
• Resources
Psychological and Developmental Needs

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

**Self Actualization** – feel competent, motivated, works toward success and being the best they can be.
Lack of previous unmet needs can prevent from reaching competency.

**Esteem** – feeling good about themselves.
If children lack inner strength and ability to feel appreciated, they will experience lack of independence, and poor decision making.

**Belonging** – need to belong and feel loved.
If unable to feel like they belong, children can become depressed and feel lonely. They may also develop generalized and social anxiety.

**Security** – need to feel safe, protected and healthy.
If children lack security, they can start to feel anxious and unreasonable fears start to show up.

**Survival** – basic needs met. Food, water and shelter.
If not met, children can struggle to make it through the day and can’t move to safety as easily.
The University of Florida conducted a study on Traumatic Stress that helped to explain what happens developmentally when a child is severely stressed. The most common stress reaction is regression within their developmental phase or to a lower developmental age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal Development</th>
<th>Possible stressful reactions</th>
<th>Consider a referral for professional help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preschool Ages (1-5)</strong></td>
<td>• Thumb sucking</td>
<td>• Excessive withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bedwetting, bladder and bowel control</td>
<td>• Uncontrollable crying</td>
<td>• Does not respond to special attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of self control</td>
<td>• Trembling with fright and immobile</td>
<td>• Extremely Aggressive Behavior (more recent years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No sense of time</td>
<td>• Run aimlessly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fear of dark, bedtime, animals etc..</td>
<td>• Excessive clinging, fear of being left alone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speech difficulty</td>
<td>• Sensitivity to loud noises or bad weather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appetite changes</td>
<td>• Confusion, irritability, and eating problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| <strong>Middle Childhood (Ages 5-11)</strong> | • Irritability | • Begins to act much younger |
| • Whining | • Sleep problems | • Absolutely will not separate from parents |
| • Aggression, questioning authority, trying new behaviors to fit in | • Headache, nausea, visual or hearing problems | • Sudden bedwetting problems that last over two months |
| • Competition for parents attention (siblings) | • Irrational fears | • Consistently on edge, seems afraid of the world, can’t be calmed |
| • School avoidance | • Refusal to go to school, distractibility, fighting | • Crying jags over more than a 3 to 4 week period |
| • Nightmares, fear of the dark | • Poor school performance | • Refusal to go to school, distractibility and fighting lasts more than 2 weeks |
| • Clinging | • Excessive withdrawal, doesn’t want to talk to anyone or be bothered | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal Development</th>
<th>Possible stressful reactions</th>
<th>Consider a referral for professional help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Adolescence (Ages 11-14)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sleep disturbances</td>
<td>• Withdrawal, isolation</td>
<td>• Disoriented memory gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appetite disturbances</td>
<td>• Depression, sadness</td>
<td>• Severely withdrawn or depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rebellion in the home, refusal to do chores</td>
<td>• Aggressive behaviors</td>
<td>• Severe oppositional and disobedience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Psychosomatic problems (rash, bowel, asthma, stomach problems, aches and pains)</td>
<td>• Unable to care for self (eat, drink, bathe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Acts younger</td>
<td>• Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adolescence (Ages 14-18)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poor concentration</td>
<td>• Confusion</td>
<td>• Same symptoms as previous stages, especially middle childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Headaches, tension,</td>
<td>• Withdrawal or isolation</td>
<td>• Hallucinates, afraid will kill self or others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disturbance with appetite and sleep</td>
<td>• Antisocial behavior (stealing, aggression, acting out)</td>
<td>• Cannot make simple decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Begin to identify with peers, need for alone time, may isolate self from family on occasion</td>
<td>• Withdrawal into heavy sleep, night frights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Psychosomatic problems (rash, bowel, asthma, stomach problems, aches and pains)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the University of Florida Study, childhood stress is defined as:

- disruption in stability

The study also indicates that the two most frequent indicators of stress in children are:

- changes in behavior
- Regression in behavior

When providing play therapy with children, this is something I see on a regular basis. Some form of behavior almost always shows up as regression.
What Stresses Children Out?

**Family Stress:**

- Arguments
- Fighting/Domestic Violence
- Separation/Divorce
- Job loss
- Loss of Pet
- Family illness/Loss
- Financial strain
- Parental/Guardian Stress
- Moving
- Alcohol/Drug abuse
- Abuse/Neglect (lack of basic needs)
School and Social Environment Stress:

- Belonging to a group or not
- Too much structure/Not enough structure
- Bullying/Fighting
- Loss of friends
- Performance anxiety
- Too many or no activities
- Tests/Homework
- Social media
- Lack of sleep
- Missing/Changing Schools
General Stress:

- TV or Radio News
- Hearing fears of adults
- Worry about disappointing others
- Witnessing societal accidents or violence
- Natural disasters (Tornado, Floods, Fire, etc..)
Economic Climate

• Currently and in recent years our economical climate has had a significant impact on families. **Increases in parental and societal stress has increased significantly.**

• Children pay attention to **reactions of their parents or caregivers.** As a result stress in children also may increase.

• Over the past 5 years their has been **an increase in clients having anxiety and panic attacks.** This is seen in both adults and children.
Economical concerns presented by clients most often are:

- Job loss
- Marital/Family discord
- Financial Stress

Whatever happens with the parent, guardian or caregiver can also happen to the child. However, children often present their reaction to the stress as “bad behavior.”
Media – The New Stress Factor

- TV/Netflix/Gaming
- Cell Phones/Texting/Smart phones
- iPod Touch/iPad and tablets
- Internet
- Facebook/Myspace
- Twitter/Tumblr
- Instagram/Snapchat
- Pinterest

Kids are exposed to more, faster. Kids also seem to be growing up faster. However, they also reach peak stress faster. Often before they are ready to emotionally handle it. As a result they crash and regress.
Challenges for Childcare Providers

• As a childcare provider you often have **very little control over parental guidelines** that may be contributing to children’s stress.

• If you are also a parent with children at home your children may be exposed to more stress.

• It may not be easy or an option to reduce your availability or the amount of children you care for.
  - you get attached
  - you depend upon the income

• You have **limited time, resources** or control as how you can help kids to reduce their stress.

• Finding a **balance** that keeps stress to minimum.
• One of the ways the children process stress and worries is through play.

• Unstructured play and structured play are very important.

• They often don’t have the language or the understanding to express how they feel.

• We often take things away from children when they misbehave. However, in order for them to have some way to process whatever stress they experience, there needs to be some activities that they can do. Giving them drawing paper, coloring books or any expressive activity can help.
In 2009, Stuart Brown, M.D. & Christopher Vaughan authored a book called “Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul.” Stuart Brown spent his life studying play. Studies show that:

- **The ability to play is critical** not only to being happy, but also in sustaining social relationships and being an innovative person.

- Play is correlated with the development of the frontal cortex of the brain. The cortex determines emotional states, mood and circuits in the brain.

- **Play is essential in brain development** due to children’s rapidly developing brain.

- When play is denied in children and adults, their mood darkens. They lose optimism and the capability to sustain the feeling of pleasure. **In the long-term going without play becomes an extreme deficit.**
Psychological and Developmental Needs

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Self Actualization – feel competent, motivated, works toward success and being the best they can be.
Lack of previous unmet needs can prevent from reaching competency.

Esteem – feeling good about themselves.
If children lack inner strength and ability to feel appreciated, they will experience lack of independence, and poor decision making

Belonging – need to belong and feel loved.
If unable to feel like they belong, children can become depressed and feel lonely. They may also develop generalized and social anxiety.

Security – need to feel safe, protected and healthy.
If children lack security, they can start to feel anxious and unreasonable fears start to show up.

Survival - basic needs met. Food, water and shelter.
If not met, children can struggle to make it through the day and can’t move to safety as easily.
What can you do?

“First and foremost take care of you and your family!”

Taking care of stress is threefold, Body, Mind/Emotion and Spirit.

Quiet Time - to help rest from noise, media and constant activities is essential in teaching kids to be still. It allows time to rejuvenate, process their day and reduce stress.

• Body – basic needs first
  - Healthy meals and snacks
  - Rest
  - Body Awareness
  - Body Scan
  - Progressive Relaxation
  - Guided imagery (can use in quiet time).
• **Mind/Emotions**

Find ways to accentuate the positive

- Positive daily thoughts/positive reframe
- Feeling recognition
- Guided imagery
- Worry/Problems Box/Worry Dolls
- Worry Stones/Rocks (also in Wilma Jean book)
- Crafts
- Play dough or Clay
Heart or Ice Cream Feelings:
Paris Goodyear-Brown presented the Feelings Heart at a conference I attended several years ago. You can use any type of a picture.

You can also use with an outline of a body and explore where they feel it in your body as a preventative measure.
Anger is a secondary emotion. If you can help identify how kids are really feeling, you can help them cope with feelings without going.
• Spirit
Find support!
The right amount of support can make a world of difference.

- Nature
- Playing outdoors
- Meditation or prayer (see resource list)
  Moody Cow Meditates or Zen Shorts
- Teach mindfulness
- What makes you happy/peaceful activity

Spend time playing, nurturing, and encouraging them.

Making them feel important and cared for nurture’s their spirit.
Resources

Reading list

Cool Cats/Calm Kids: Relaxation and Stress Management for Young People
- by Mary L. Williams

Goldie is Mad - by Margie Palantini

Wilma Jean the Worry Machine: Activity and Idea book - by Julia Cook

Moody Cow Meditates – Kerry Lee MacLean

Zen Shorts - Jon J. Muth
Websites

www.innerhealthstudio.com

www.kidlutions.blogspot.com

Thank You

Final Thoughts

• You also need to play and relax. It is essential to your well-being as a caregiver.

Questions?