



From the School Psychologist and School Counselor

## *Weathering the 'Rainy' Days of Life*

As we move into early spring, we often look for ways to deal with the stress that can build up from 'cabin fever'. March is considered one of the hardest months in the North Country and in our schools. Children become restless from being in doors. Although the weather is generally not as cold or snowy, the thawing ground and mixed weather conditions make it even more difficult to get outside.

While 'cabin fever' can be stressful, other factors can contribute to creating more serious stress in children. These can include new situations, uncertain expectations, anticipating something unpleasant, fear of failure, and major developmental transitions (i.e., graduating from high school). A child's ability to handle stress is based on a number of factors. Personality type, gender, learned ways of responding, and the child's developmental stage impact the ability to cope.

Symptoms of stress in children can vary according to age and can build up over time. Some things to look for in younger children include unusual irritability, toileting or eating difficulties, and fearfulness. In older children, moodiness, increasing withdrawal, acting out behaviors, sleeping difficulties and physical complaints can all be signs that the adolescent is experiencing something above and beyond the typical day to day stress.

Educators and parents can do a lot to help children adapt to stress. Children do need to learn that daily 'hassles' are a normal part of life. Adults can help children cope more effectively with stress by ensuring that the child's basic needs are met. Healthy eating, exercise, adequate sleep, and appropriate medical care are all important for helping to prevent stress from building up and taking over.

Children can also be taught that their attitude towards life can impact the way the stressful event affects them. Sometimes children feel powerless to control the events around them. Of course, in some cases, the external events are uncontrollable and can be overwhelming even for the child who has developed effective coping skills. When this occurs, it would be advisable to consult with the child's physician or a mental health practitioner.

In general, however, children who view themselves as having an 'internal locus' of control versus 'external locus' of control can often get through the stress better. For example, a child with an external locus of control may believe that no matter what he or she does, bad things will happen and the child is incapable of handling those situations. On the other hand, children with an internal locus of control may believe that although they may not be able to completely control a situation, they may be able to control their reactions.

'Reframing' irrational beliefs about oneself and the environment for the child can be the first step to helping your child see things from a different perspective. Reframing can be done by helping your child look at the situation or at him or herself from a more realistic, balanced point of view and by problem solving in order to explore various options.

Even in dire situations, a 'silver lining' often exists. Pointing out the silver lining will help the child believe that things can improve over time. This kind of 'positive' stress control encourages children to be more self sufficient rather than relying on negative behavior patterns for coping. Setting realistic expectations for your child is also important. It can also be beneficial if the child has an opportunity to rehearse in advance an upcoming stressful situation.

In addition, modeling effective coping strategies when parents are under stress can serve as a powerful teaching tool for all ages. Finally, the value of being a good listener cannot be understated. Although teenagers may not want to discuss their stress with their parents, it is helpful for a parent to listen without judgment and encourage the teenager to discuss his or her stress with another trusted individual.

So, while parents cannot prevent their children from experiencing the 'rainy days' of life, we can use these as opportunities for building a child's confidence in him or herself so that those 'rainy' days are easier to face. Effectively dealing with stressors in childhood and adolescence establishes a foundation of coping skills that will benefit the child throughout his or her adult life.

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