



FEATURESTORY

Fighting First-day Fear

Michael C. Nagel explains why many children experience real anxiety upon starting school, and how parents can reduce the stress of the situation.

It's the first day of school – how stressful could that possibly be? Truth be told, the anxiety and stress a child might face as they begin school or a new school year can engage very powerful mechanisms of the mind and body that can be quite problematic.

However, before we begin untangling the impact of a new school year on the minds of the children around us, I would like you to picture yourself in each of the following scenarios. You are living during the time of

the woolly mammoth and are in the midst of hunting for food when, out of nowhere, a large predator, which is determined to make a meal out of you, traps you. You are on a passenger airline and for no apparent reason the plane suddenly drops 300m. You are heading for a very important job interview and your car breaks down. You are five years old and are attending a new school for the very first time. It is probably safe to assume that you have identified each of these incidents as a stressful event.



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Interestingly, you may also believe that given the different context of the above situations, a stress response to each would also be very different. The reality, however, is that the threat of a predator bearing down on you can elicit exactly the same physiological response that you might feel as a child on your first day at school.

Quite often, parents do not fully appreciate how stressful the return to school can be for their children. Again, I would like you to imagine something.

You have been away from work for two months, enjoying the company of friends, playing, relaxing and doing whatever your heart desires, but you now have to return to work. Chances are that this situation would elicit some measure of stress or discomfort in most adults. For children, a similar scenario can be very stressful, especially if they are starting school for the first time, or moving to a new school. Fear and anxiety about the impending school year can combine with sadness about the



end of the summer holidays. Moreover, if the new school year coincides with a death, divorce, relocation or some other stressful event, the cumulative impact of multiple stressors can be even more problematic.

Perhaps one reason why parents do not truly understand the debilitating effects of stress and starting back at school can be found in how we actually define or think of stress. Many people define stress as dealing with the busyness of life, 'time pressure' or fatigue, yet research tells us that each of these is a consequence of stress and not its cause. Stress is not the 'busyness' of life, nor is it about being tired; children are usually busy, but they may not be stressed.

A scientific understanding of stress may assist in helping to plan for a new school year and for enhancing everyone's social and emotional wellbeing. The first and perhaps most important thing to remember is that there are two types of stressor, absolute and relative. Absolute stressors are 'real' threats to all, while relative stressors are events or situations that are individually interpreted as being stressful. An earthquake is a good example of an absolute stressor, while a transit strike is more characteristic of a relative stressor – those who rely on public transport would have to deal with the unpredictability of how they might get to work.

A relative stressor is made up of one or more of the following characteristics: it is novel; unpredictable; threatening; and/or perceived as being out of one's control. Significantly, absolute stressors evoke the greatest physiological response, but they are rare. However, when a relative stressor evokes a physiological response, the effects can also be problematic, considering what happens to the mind and body during stress.

When an individual interprets a

situation as stressful, a system is triggered in the brain that tells a specific brain region, the hypothalamus, to initiate a series of chemical reactions, including the release of very powerful hormones. These reactions, in turn, signal the 'fight or flight' mechanisms of the brain, which engage our entire physiology and require a great deal of energy. A product of evolution, the stress response designed to ensure our survival is very primal and has changed very little since humankind first began to walk on this planet. What have changed, however, are the multitude of situations that we interpret as stressful, and this is no different for children.

Children do experience stress and often we do not recognise the signs, or we shrug them off as something 'they will get over'. Remember, in order for a stress response to occur, a situation need only be interpreted as novel, unpredictable, threatening or beyond one's sense of control. As a way of remembering these characteristics, one could use the following acronym: NUTS (Novelty, Unpredictability, Threat, Sense of control). Now consider what it is like for a child to enter a new learning environment for the first time. The first day of school can be very stressful for many children. This is a relative stressor that can be overcome, but it should not be underestimated. Relative stressors can hinder thinking and shut down learning. For example, one of the chemicals released in the brain resulting from stress is cortisol, which is a very powerful substance. We have all felt the effects of elevated cortisol. Think back to a time when you were involved in a heated argument with someone, which tapped deeply into the emotional part of your brain, resulting in a great deal of anger or frustration. Like many



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other forms of stress, this type of event results in increased cortisol levels. Now think back to after that event when some time later you stopped and thought, 'Why didn't I say this?' or 'How come I didn't say that?' This phenomenon occurs all too often, and is referred to in neurological research as 'downshifting'. When cortisol levels are elevated, your capacity to think is diminished because you are engaged in a fight or flight response, and your brain is geared for survival. Only after enough time has passed for cortisol to return to normal levels do you begin to have clarity of thought. If a child is stressed when they arrive at school or during the school day to the point where their cortisol levels are elevated, cognition or learning isn't likely to occur.

In the short term, stress hinders learning. Long-term stress, or chronic stress, is even more problematic. There is a large body of research that tells us that children who live in chronically stressful environments develop a variety of disorders as they get older. Substantive evidence is available which tells us that

childhood and adolescent stress are related to a variety of psychiatric symptoms and health risks, including depression, suicide ideation, actual risk of suicide, eating disorders, early alcohol and drug use, and obesity. There is also a growing body of neuro-scientific research telling us that the powerful chemicals designed to promote our survival in stressful situations can actually impact on the normal growth and development of very important regions of the brain, especially during the early stages of life and through adolescence when the brain is going through a process of neurological maturation.

Not only are children more susceptible, because their brains are maturing, to long-term difficulties as a result of stress, but they have not yet developed a repertoire of skills for handling stress. Therefore, as the new school year draws near, it is essential for parents to give children strategies and skills to combat stress.

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threatening, or out of the child's sense of control (NUTS).

The first step in preparing for the impending school year is to establish daily routines. The school day is highly structured, and a bit of practice at home can go a long way. As the first day draws closer, a visit to the school and classrooms and, if possible, meeting some of the teachers, is also very beneficial. Ensuring that a child knows where the important things are (for example, the toilets and the office) is helpful as well. It is also advisable for parents to find out as much as they can about how the school day operates in terms of learning periods and breaks, how the first day of the year may unfold and what is expected of children, so that this can be discussed with them ahead of time. Perhaps the best rule of thumb is to make the unfamiliar as familiar as possible for the child, by planning ahead, discussing issues and, most importantly, listening to their concerns.

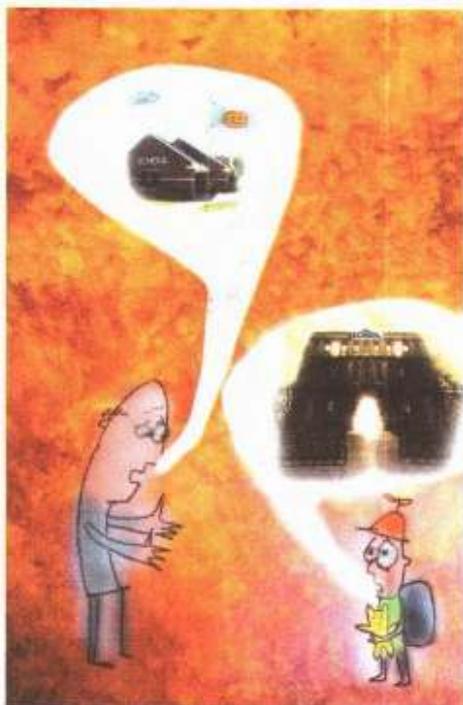
Once the year begins, parents need continually to be on the lookout for what might cause their child stress and what might be contributing to their own levels

of stress. Quite often, adult perspectives are not aligned with a child's view of what is stressful, and so communication is a must. Children's stress levels can also be exacerbated when their parents are stressed, so parents need to be mindful of their own stress, take steps to reduce it and avoid displaying it.

It's important to remember that healthy social and emotional development is a precursor not only to academic achievement, but also to a life free of serious physical and mental illness. Therefore, parents need to do everything possible at home and at school to ensure that children feel safe, secure and loved and that they know they are able to get help when they need it.

Most children also learn how to deal with stress by following the examples of their parents and other role models. So don't stress, just do what you can to reduce the chance of your children, and yourself, going NUTS. ■

Dr Michael C. Nagel is senior lecturer in the Faculty of Science, Health and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast.



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