

Stretching Kids Without Breaking Them: Stress-Free Ways of Promoting Development

William R. Stixrud, Ph.D.
 8720 Georgia Avenue, Suite 606
 Silver Spring, MD 20910
 301-565-0534

OVERVIEW

I. Big picture issues that relate to long-term outcomes for our children and our society.

- A. Short-term effects of stress on learning, academics, mood, and psychological adjustment
- B. Short-term effects of insufficient sleep on health, safety, learning, and mood
- C. "Downstream" effects of stress, pressure, insufficient sleep, and a workaholic lifestyle
- D. The "shared delusional disorder" regarding education and success

II. The major take-home points:

A. Children and adolescents need to be challenged in order to develop their potential. They develop best if they are challenged within a context of safety and support.

B. Stress and fatigue lead to hugely reduced efficiency in brain functioning, and educating students who are tired and stressed is largely unproductive.

C. By reducing stress, pressure, and fatigue we will end up with better educated, more successful, and better adjusted adults.

D. Students will be more successful if we emphasize self-understanding, self-regulation, and a sense of control rather than college admissions as the main goals of school.

WHY A SENSE OF CONTROL IS A BIG DEAL FOR KIDS (AND THEIR PARENTS)

I. What is a sense of control (aka a sense of agency)?

A. Definition: The subjective experience that we are initiating, executing, and controlling our volitional actions in the world.

B. In other words, "I can direct my own life and take steps to solve my own problems." It also implies not trying to control what can't be controlled (think the Serenity Prayer)

C. Some antonyms:

- 1. *Overwhelmed, driven, obsessed, out of control*
- 2. *Helpless, hopeless, resigned, stuck*

D. A sense of control does not mean:

- 1. Thinking that you can or should control everything
- 2. Trying to control other people

- A. Early work with kids who repeated a grade ("My parents made me repeat.")
- B. Seeing two kids with ADHD in the same week.
- C. Advice as a therapist: Don't work harder to help a client than he/she does.
- D. Article in 1986 - Be a homework consultant rather than the homework police.
- E. Experience as a therapist - adults wanting to figure out what they really wanted.
- F. Work with underachievers: "Who's most upset when you don't turn in an assignment?"
- G. Work with obsessively driven kids - the power of Plan B thinking
- H. Ross Greene's advice: Let explosive kids know you won't try to force them.

Confirming experiences

- A. Health, longevity, and mental health
- B. Learning and academic performance
- C. Job performance and career success

Because it's good for the brain, a healthy sense of control is good for everything.

- 1. Reed Larsen: Passionate involvement in self-chosen pastimes is the best predictor of self-motivation in later adolescence and young adulthood.
- 2. Flow experiences train the brain to function with high effort, strong attention, and low stress, which is how we want to function most of the time as adults.

Flow and intrinsic motivation

- 1. A sense of autonomy is the key to self-motivation.
- 2. We have to have the sense that "This is my life and I'm responsible for it."
- A. Adaptive (vs. maladaptive) motivational style: "Give me hard and I'll work hard."
- 2. Growth (versus fixed) mindset: "I can get smarter and better through my own efforts."
- B. Self-Determination Theory: We have 3 basic needs: relatedness, autonomy, competence.

Carol Dweck's mindsets theory

A sense of control (aka autonomy) is the key to self-motivation.

- 1. Anxiety and avoidance reflect the flight part.
- 2. Opposition, resistance, and anger reflect the fight part.
- 3. Giving up (learned helplessness) reflects the freeze part.
- C. When stressed, kids can fight, flee, or freeze.

- 1. It's the sense of control rather than the actual control that reduces stress.
- 2. If the prefrontal cortex thinks that it has some control, life is much less stressful.

Many scientists think that a low sense of control is the big one.

- 1. N - Novelty
- 2. U - Unpredictability
- 3. T - Threat to Ego (Threat to Self)
- 4. S - low Sense of Control

What makes life stressful (Sonia Lupien's NUTS)?

A low sense of control is the most stressful thing in the universe.

1. Depression "scars" the brain, raises risk of future depression.
 2. Extraordinary increase in serious mental illness on college campuses (Kadison).
- B. Downstream effects of depression in adolescence
1. Mood and anxiety disorders are disorders of stress dysregulation (Danny Pine)
 2. Many scientists believe that we are seeing an epidemic of depression.
 3. The age of onset for depression has become younger and younger.
 4. Gender differences: Girls are much more vulnerable after puberty.
- A. Stress, anxiety, and depression ("Stress is to depression what that iceberg was to the Titanic")

III. Stress and mental health

1. The optimal internal state for learning is relaxed alertness.
 2. The optimal learning environment involves high challenge but low threat.
 3. Kids need to feel safe in school to learn (*alma mater* = fostering mother).
- C. Educational implications from research on stress
1. Stress makes it hard to concentrate, as it impairs selective attention.
 2. Impairs planning, organization, inhibition, working memory, executive skills.
 3. Stress limits mental flexibility, problem solving, creativity, "outside the box"
 4. Stress compromises memory storage, retention, and retrieval.
- B. How stress undermines learning
1. Instinctive behavior has survival value in crisis (you can't overthink responses).
 2. Stress thus "disconnects" higher cognitive centers from primitive stress centers.
 3. Nature doesn't want us to stop and think clearly when we're threatened.
- A. Why we are, literally, out of our minds when we are highly stressed.

II. Why stress is bad for learning ("Stress makes us stupid." - Daniel Goleman)

1. The same chemicals released by academic stress or being late as facing a tiger.
 2. The stress response evolved to last a few minutes or hours at most.
 3. In modern life, the stress response can stay turned on for weeks, months.
 4. Chronic exposure to stress hormones (e.g., **cortisol**) is almost always harmful.
- B. The stress response (fight, flight, or freeze) evolved to protect us from predators.
1. "We're constantly seeking safety and calmness." (Forges)
 2. The brain perceives threat and initiates the fight, flight, or flee response.
 3. The *amygdala* is particularly sensitive to threat.
- A. The brain is a threat detector. (S. Lupien; S. Forges)
1. The human stress response (which occurs when situations are perceived as stressful)

WHAT IS STRESS AND WHY IS IT SUCH A BIG DEAL?

- I. Experience of meditation: Giving up control can increase your sense of control.
 J. Increasing awareness that I don't know what's in kids' best interest
 K. Conversation with Jean Bayard: It's a matter of respect.

- INSUFFICIENT SLEEP AS A CHRONIC STRESSOR**
- I. The importance of sleep: "Rest is the basis of activity." (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi)
- A. Sleep is crucial for survival, growth, repair and healing.
 - B. Sleep is highly associated with self-regulation, mental health.
 - C. Sleep is very important for learning, memory, and retention.
- II. Children – and their parents and teachers – are profoundly sleep deprived.
- A. Adults sleep 20-25 percent less than 100 years ago (and are sleeping less every year).
 - B. National Sleep Foundation's current sleep report card:
1. Ninety (90) percent of parents think their kids get enough sleep.
 2. 60 percent of high school students report extreme daytime sleepiness.
 3. Half of all teens get less than seven hours on week nights.
 4. By 12th grade, they average slightly more than 6 1/2.
- III. Sleep deprivation should be considered chronic stressor contributing to overload.
- A. Sleep deprivation has similar cognitive and emotional effects as chronic stress.
 - B. Losing one hour of sleep for one night significantly changes EEG in children.
 - C. Chronic mild sleep insufficiency is more impairing than being legally drunk.
- IV. Even very minor sleep restriction impairs cognitive functioning in children and teens.
- A. Study of minor sleep restriction for three nights (Avi Sadeh, Tel Aviv University)
 - B. Sixth graders who slept 35 minutes less functioned like fourth graders on tests.
 - D. They lost two years of cognitive efficiency in working memory, attention, reaction time.
- V. Mind blowers:
- A. If you are ever tired during the day, it's because you are sleep deprived.
 - B. Nature wants you to go to bed the same time every night and wake up without an alarm.
- SOME OTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT MOTIVATION**
- I. Cooperation versus competition
- A. Competition in schools
1. Eighty percent of activities in suburban public elementary schools are competitive.

D. Some mental health problems are more common in affluent kids.

- C. The potential effects of stress on moral, character, and motivational development
3. The importance of preventing mental health problems in young people (D. Pine).
- D. Recent research: Many high-achievers feel they must compromise their values.
 - 1. Development of a false self (Roni Cohen-Sandler's *Stress Out Girls*).
 - 2. High stress compromises development of intimate peer relationships.
 - 3. High stress fuels need for escape and/or control – at risk for drugs, alcohol, etc.
 - 4. High stress fuels need for escape and/or control – at risk for drugs, alcohol, etc.

- 1. Depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders
- 2. Substance abuse

STRESS-FREE IDEAS FOR PROMOTING DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

I. Shoot for balance in your own life and regularity in routine.

- A. Decide to make living a balanced, centered, and healthy life a priority for yourself.
 - 1. Protect your own brain, body and your happiness.
 - 2. Model good self-care for you kids, including respect for rest.
- B. Regularity of routine means consistency in:
 - 1. Sleeping and eating
 - 2. Exercise and stress management.
- C. Most happy, relatively non-anxious people have regular routines for de-stressing.
 - 1. Exercise (see the book *Spark* by John Ratey)
 - 2. Yoga, meditation, massage, forest bathing
- D. Get enough sleep. Get enough sleep. Get enough sleep.

II. Rewards and punishment

- A. External rewards have some benefit.
- B. Competition in life: Most employment is not competitive.
 - 2. Competition is a weak motivational strategy in the classroom.
 - 3. Only children who believe they have a chance to win are motivated by competition.
 - 4. We do our best work when we compete against ourselves ("personal best").
- 1. Less than 20 percent of the workforce is paid according to individual performance.
- 2. Work success depends on competence, cooperation, motivation - not competitiveness.
- 3. The relationship between competitiveness and life success is low.

- 1. Can be helpful for short-term goals, modifying behavior, getting cooperation.
 - 2. Are effective for brief, routine, rule-bound tasks with little intrinsic payoff.
 - 3. Can get a student started on something, may take important first steps.
 - 4. For kids with ADHD, rewards can get the brain to activate for boring tasks.
 - 5. Rewards can help kids do stuff that is really hard (e.g., go to bed on time).
- B. Rewards can decrease motivation over time, give us more of what we don't want.
 - 1. When extrinsic reinforcement is offered for learning, learning is actually reduced.
 - 2. Rewards can lower performance, crush creativity, lead to bad behavior (Pink).
 - 3. They can reinforce idea that someone other than you is responsible for your life.
 - 4. They can erode self-generated interest, lead to interest only in the reward itself.
- C. The brain sees rewards and punishment as a loss of control, which is stressful.
 - 1. The brain sees through extrinsic rewards; it evolved to detect and resist control.
 - 2. It will devise ways to get the reward without learning, doing the job or assignment.
 - 3. (Kids often get A's in courses they hardly remember after a few months.)

- II. Take a long view.**
- A. Have faith in frontal lobe development.
 B. Remember that the vast majority of kids turn out fine.
 C. Maintain a sense of humor; enjoy seeing who your kid decides to become.
- III. Place enjoying your child as the highest priority**
- A. The value for a child of experiencing himself as a "joy-creating organism"
1. Being glad to see them
 2. Spontaneously enjoying their company
- B. Try to remove blocks to enjoyment
1. Get help if necessary to handle problem behavior.
 2. Do what you can to de-stress.
- IV. Listen, empathize, help children understand themselves without taking on their pain.**
- A. The value of parents really listening to their children and to each other
1. *How to Listen So Your Kids Will Talk and Talk So Kids Will Listen*
 2. If we validate their point of view, they will tend to look to us for guidance.
 3. When you're empathetic, you model skill that's crucial for good relationships.
- B. We can help kids feel good about themselves better if we aren't worried sick.
1. Resilience develops through dealing with challenges (Michael Meaney)
 2. We can be more flexible in helping if be stay calm and centered.
 3. Motto: Calm ourselves first.
- V. Practice acceptance of – and making peace with – current reality.**
- A. Accepting these truths is liberating and empowering:
1. You can't make someone do something against their will.
 2. You can't make someone want something they don't want.
 3. You can't make someone not want what they want.
 4. Mantra: It's OK for them to want what they want, not want what they don't want.
- B. The truth is, it's the child's life, and he or she is ultimately responsible for it.
1. This means, in part, that it's the child's responsibility to do schoolwork (or not)
 2. We should guide, support, teach, provide consequences – but not try to force.
 3. Often attempts to change others cause them to hold tighter.
 4. Being clear about who's responsible for what is extremely empowering.
 5. **Don't work harder to help a kid than the kid works to help herself.**
- C. A close corollary: Don't work harder to help a kid than he works to help himself.
1. Underachievers spend huge energy resisting doing what's in their best interest.
 2. They also spend great energy resisting others' attempts to help them.
 3. If we feel like we're working harder, say "Something's wrong with this picture."
 4. If we take responsibility for what is theirs, we will weaken them.

D. For support in accepting: Read books like Byron Katie's *Loving What Is*, Barry Kaufman's *To Love Is To Be Happy With*, or Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*.

VI. **Place a strong emphasis on promoting self-understanding in kids.** "We should be thinking less about how to motivate students than trying to identify what is already motivating them." (James Zull)

A. Help them figure out what they truly want, think about their special talents, life purpose.

1. What do I want?

2. What do I love to do?

3. What am I good at?

4. What do I need help with?

5. How can I get myself to do what I want and/or need to do?

B. Remember that adults don't truly know what's in a child's best interest.

1. We don't know ultimately what he/she wants; that's for him or her to figure out.
2. Often what seems to be an enormous problem turns out to be a great gift.

C. Emphasize **creating a life, developing oneself in order to serve the world.**

VII. **Teach, model, and attribute a love for challenge and persistence in the face of difficulty.**

A. Model enjoyment of discovering strategies, solving difficult problems.

B. Point out to children students when they demonstrate effort and persistence.

C. Teach kids that things happen for a reason; something good can come out of anything.

D. Teach kids that many successful people *fail their way to success*.

VIII. **Encourage "flow" in any activity and emphasize the value of pastimes.**

A. Teach kids that working hard at things they love trains their brain for success.

B. Successful people don't find something they hate and make themselves do it.

C. Remember that children don't have to be pushed constantly to use their potential.

1. Benefits of leisure, rest, "downtime"

2. Historical examples (e.g., Einstein working in a patent office)

3. If it feels to you like you're pushing, remind yourself that this isn't helpful.

IX. **Encourage children to practice decision making; insist on adolescents doing so.**

A. Possibly the best thing you can communicate to a child or an adolescent is confidence in his ability to decide for himself.

1. Communicate "You're the expert on you" and "You've got a brain in your head".
2. Help kids understand pros and cons, then go with their decision unless it's crazy.
3. With very young children, give choices.

B. Children need practice looking at themselves honestly, trusting their own intuition.

1. Tell them "It's your call."

2. Ask, "How did that work out?"

C. Adolescents need practice running their own lives. (Don't send a kid to college who hasn't had lots of experience making his own decisions.)

X. Don't fight over homework!

- A. Home as a safe haven: For kids who are stressed in school, home should be a place to
- B. Parents are the people charged with loving unconditionally.

XI. Resist making decisions based on fear and/or competition.

- A. Fear that child's potential will not be fully realized
- B. Fear that other kids will get ahead of yours
- C. Remember, kids need to feel safe in school.

VII.

Undermine the myths about life success.

- A. Top students are far more successful than other students (it's Yale or McDonalds.)

- 1. Valedictorians aren't more successful than other college graduates by late 20's.
- 2. The skill set required to be a successful student is very different from life success.
- 3. If we teach kids that their future depends on doing well in school and, by definition, half the population is below the mean, we create a lot of discouraged kids.

- B. High school grades will follow you the rest of your life. (In fact, once a student has 30 or so credits at a community college he can apply to college without submitting a high school transcript.)

- C. Where you go to college makes an enormous difference in your success in life:

- 1. It makes little difference in career success, none in life success more generally.
- 2. No relationship between college attended and lifetime earnings or happiness.

- D. High homework loads produce the best learning:

- 1. After 70 years of research, no positive relationship has been found between homework and learning in elementary school.
- 2. Studying when you are tired is a complete waste of time.

- E. Life is highly competitive and successful people are highly competitive.

- 1. There is much more cooperation than competition in adult life.
- 2. Successful people are passionate about what they love.
- 3. Successful people work hard and are resilient about perceived failure.

SUGGESTED READING

C. Dweck, *Mindsets*
 R. Lavoie, *The Motivation Breakthrough*
 T. Hartmann, *Healing ADD*
 D. Pink, *Drive*
 R. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*
 A. Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*
 D. Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*
 J. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain*
 R. Greene, *Lost in School*
 R. Dreikurs, *Children the Challenge*
 M. Diamond, *Magic Trees of the Mind*