

Carefree Youth? Kids Get Stressed, Too

Kids have it made, right? They go to school, play for hours and their parents take care of most of their needs. How much stress could children possibly feel? Surprisingly, plenty.

"Many parents don't understand that it's a lot more complicated growing up these days," says James A.H. Farrow, M.D., professor of pediatrics at Tulane University.

Well-meaning parents often don't understand that they're putting too many demands on their children.

"I can't tell you how many parents say, 'How can he be under stress; he's only 10?' " says Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D., clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington.

Many children simply are overwhelmed. "Of course we want our kids to swim, play soccer and Little League baseball, take piano lessons, join Girl Scouts -- but sometimes it's too much," Dr. Kastner says. "Sometimes children are afraid to tell their parents when there are too many activities, for fear of letting them down."

At a tender age, our children also must make decisions about relationships, sex and drugs while trying to fit in with peers and live up to their parents' expectations and values. Add to that the trials of modern life -- divorce, parents who are busy with work, frequent changes of school -- and you have a recipe for stress and stress-related maladies.

The headache, stomachache or fatigue a child complains of before school might be brought on by stress. But the pain is real, according to the American Psychiatric Association. Children are more susceptible to bodily discomfort; they have a lower tolerance for problems.

"When children suffer depression or anxiety, they may have trouble sleeping or lose their appetite. Parents can help, says Dr. Farrow. Try talking to your children. Show an interest in them beyond simply asking how school was. "Ask them about particular aspects of school, friends, a team," he says.

If problems persist, Dr. Farrow says, your pediatrician is a good place to start. He or she may recommend counseling for both your child and you.

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