

## The Stress of Being Gifted and Talented

Is your child stressed or burned out? Do you know the signs?

Stress Symptoms of overwhelming stress:

Along with the usual stressors of childhood and growing up, gifted kids have unique dilemmas which can increase their stress. They may find it difficult to accept their gifts and talents along with their limitations. They may become aware that they are "different" at the same time they are developing a strong sense of belonging with their peers. They may also have difficulty drawing the fine line between excelling and attempting perfection. All children respond differently to stress.

Here are some common signs:

Loses perspective and sense of humor -- is no longer excited or happy about school, activities, achievements, or friends. May resent parents, teachers, or new assignments.

Is bored, tired, and listless.

Suffers from sleeplessness, or has difficulty waking up.

Overreacts to everyday events; feels "trapped" or out of control.

Develops nervous habits like stuttering, blinking, or head shaking.

Complains of ailments, headaches, stomachaches, or is frequently ill.

Needs constant support and reassurance.

Acts out aggressively, and seeks attention.

Is just plain exhausted -- physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Unhealthy coping:

If your child shows any signs of stress, his/her symptoms could be a sign that he/she is trying to cope with his/her anxieties unsuccessfully. He/she could be:

Not trying because failure is too risky.

Many gifted children link their self-worth and identity with how highly they achieve. For these perfectionists, any failure is a terrible blow to their sense of self-esteem.

Not trying because coasting is simply easier.

Kids who try to just "get by" on the path of least resistance may be bored in school, or believe that playing down their abilities will win them social acceptance. But underachievement can set the stage for later guilt and a sense of personal failure.

Trying too hard.

Too many courses, too many activities, fussing over assignments, seeking perfection in every detail -- an overload of external and internal pressures can lead to burnout.

The fake -- and potentially dangerous -- escape.

Drugs, alcohol, overeating, undereating, sleeping too much or too little -- all lead to withdrawal, avoidance, and more serious problems.

Here's how to help with healthy coping:

A dose of perspective, support, humor, and motivation can make a big difference. Encourage your child to:

Take a break.

Schedule time-outs for fun, put away the books, go for a walk or a run, listen to mindless music, shoot hoops. Do nothing for a change -- if only for a little while.

Work for personal satisfaction.

Teach your child to work to please himself and to savor moments of personal satisfaction. Be supportive. Focus on improvement and effort rather than comparison with others. As long as he's working purposefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly, he doesn't have to excel at everything. Everyone needs to be cherished and to love himself, even if he doesn't "win" or take first place. Help him draw the oh-so-fine line between excellence and perfection.

Hang out with friends and family.

Help your child develop social skills by encouraging her to spend time with those people with whom she can truly be herself. To vent. To talk it out. To find an "ear" and try out possible solutions. If your child sees others laughing at their own mistakes, she might learn to do the same.

Confront the source of stress.

Ask the teacher for an extension. Help your child learn to say "no" gracefully. Suggest skills that make tasks easier. Flexibility is important. Encourage your child to seek creative solutions to rules he doesn't like or can't live with. No one likes a "wise guy" -- he should work out acceptable ways for making and changing the rules and act accordingly. If your child's ability level is mismatched to a school program, by all means speak up on her behalf. But remember: Giftedness is no excuse for rudeness. Work with the program so your child can learn empathy, teamwork, and tolerance.

Exercise and eat well.

Physical activity burns off muscle tension built up from burying stress. Eating good meals with enjoyable friends and family should be a daily treat.

Lastly, be available for guidance and advice. Many gifted kids seem very mature and talk a good game, but they're still kids and need limits, values, and guidelines. Most haven't lived long enough to gain wisdom about making decisions, and they need someone to bounce around the pros and cons of anything from which activities to join, to friends and peer pressure, to college admissions. Don't be afraid to state your feelings either. Gifted students, although bright, aren't mind readers. They have the facts and lots of them, but need the accumulated wisdom and loving guidance of parents who care. Your help will go a long way in reducing their stress.

Source: Adapted from "Helping Gifted Students with Stress Management" by Leslie S. Kaplan, ERIC EC Digest #E488, The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.