

Hidden Stressors in Children's Lives

All teachers want the best for their students however we now know that some students will not be successful at school in an academic sense. This will include students who have learning difficulties, hyperactivity problems, "special" needs whether they be physical, mental or emotional, and those who have come to school without the vital development required in the early years. These students are still going to grow up and become adults in our societies around the world, and education and schooling should involve the whole child and every child. All students need caring guidance to grow and mature. They need to have safe learning environments where they can learn how to socialise, play **and** learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. All students need to learn how to learn. They need to learn how to think, interpret the world and people, and to make sense of experiences. The very best learning environments will help children identify their unique skills or strengths, while helping them also identify their weaknesses - and the very best classrooms happen when students feel safe enough to work cooperatively with others to iron out individual differences, with strengths.

One of the main inhibitors for children's learning is prolonged chronic stress. Eric Jensen believes that there is up to a 50% reduction in neuron development within a week of a major stressor event. He also believes that the existing neurons wither with continued chronic stress. (Enriching The Brain 2006) This has enormous implications for children and their learning in our schools. Many small stressors can have the same impact as one large one such as a death of a loved one, divorce or social dislocation like moving school, town or country.

Many schools are war zones for students of all ages. Sometimes it's because of too many students in too small an area – very threatening for smaller students. Older students with inadequate self concepts may need to bully other students – always ones they perceive as weaker. Then there are those scary places called school toilets!! My sons would never go into school toilets and there would be a frantic rush for the toilets when we arrived home every afternoon. These places are often dark, wet and a place to hide from figures of authority so the troubled students often gather there – awful things happen in school toilets, and so an enormous stress for many students is "will I be able to wait until I get home??" Sadly school toilets are where most students process grief and deep sadness following the death of a loved one or a divorce - such is the terror of having an emotional "melt down" in class.

Other hidden stresses for students are finding a safe place to be when not in class whether to play, to read or just to have some time out. Children need safe spaces to play with their friends and the power struggles in playgrounds come and go – and are always lurking in the back of children's minds! Many marginalised students wander around avoiding groups of students to avoid conflict, or they hide in the library. In high schools this can be very scary because of the more advanced methods of being cruel and intimidating that adolescents have learned over the years.

Then in classrooms it is sometimes hard for teachers to have just that healthy amount of challenge in learning tasks without putting students off through that deep irrational fear of failure. It can be very scary in a classroom with a teacher who has lost control – it is especially scary for the well behaved students. They can get caught between supporting their fellow students or protecting the teacher. Noisy classrooms threaten auditory learners, and over-controlled classrooms antagonise kinaesthetic learners! Then there are horrid working environments that are too hot and stuffy, or freezing cold! Some classrooms have vomit coloured carpets, peeling paint and graffiti damaged desks and these environments make positive learning outcomes very difficult to achieve.

Other invisible stressors can be self image concerns especially around body image – too fat, too skinny, too tall or too ugly. Many of these issues stem from within the student and so they are fed by unhealthy thinking patterns that the outside world is oblivious to. Dysfunctional home environments that have lots of conflict create enormous stressors for students, and teachers are often oblivious to the “real” world that students go home to at the end of the day.

I have tried to show some of the causes of stress and anxiety that occur in students’ lives so that teachers have more empathy and understanding when they are confronted with a challenging student. There is a good chance the issue is not about them. An emotionally overwhelmed student benefits from having “safe, quiet times” in the school curriculum when they can have a break from their inner turmoil. The brain needs time out to chill, relax and allow the brain rhythms to slow down so that their capacity to think, problem solve or be more reflective can kick in.

Dr Margaret Sims from Edith Cowan University in Perth, West Australia has been studying the stress levels of children. Dr Sims measured the cortisol levels (a brain chemical present when a person is stressed) by using saliva tests on the children. She went on to say that “ chronically high cortisol levels were implicated in long term health and behavioural problems” For more information on Margaret’s study – go to http://www.psychology.ecu.edu.au/staff/cv/sims_m.php .This study would fit in with my commonsense approach to parenting and education – the better the care, the healthier the child. “A high quality child care centre was characterised by warm, responsive and respectful staff/child relationships and good communication between parents and staff” – funny because exactly the same happens in schools and high schools! High quality caring relationships lower stress levels in students – all students.

Teaching calmness and simple stress management techniques to students is also enormously valuable. These are important protective factors for life in terms of building resilience in your students. “Relaxed alertness is the optimal state for learning” and teachers need to be aware of the means to achieve that in the context of modern brain compatible learning and teaching. This is not “soft, fluffy stuff” as one principal told his staff – it is a vital tool in the effective teacher’s tool kit. Reducing stress in classrooms and school yards is an excellent starting point and asking students about the main stressors in your school – today – would be an empowering, insightful journey for everyone in the school.