

The Surgeon General's Article on Parent Stress: A Response

By

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The Surgeon General's article on Parent stress (New York Times, 8/28/24) should be taken as a warning that the emotional needs of parents have changed significantly in recent years. There are many reasons for parental stress in modern day life and its impact on children's emotional growth can be considerable.

A large majority of modern American homes need two incomes to maintain their lifestyle. So, there are fewer and fewer stay-at-home parents to deal with the daily concerns of their children. Who is there when your child gets off the school bus after being bullied and laughed at by the other children? Who is available when children play outside and need to duck into a friend's house for a snack or have an adult available to resolve a dispute? I wish I could say that these are uncommon experiences...but they are not. Children's lives are now filled with pre-school and after-school programs, nannies or babysitters. Their parents are not available to comfort and soothe them when they are stressed. Realizing this situation, some parents have taken to working from home. The problem is that they are still working. Yes...they are home, but are they available to their children? Not really. By necessity, they are focused on their computer screen or cellphone to keep up with the workload or meet deadlines. In this day and age, parents are loathe to tell their children "Go out and play with your friends" as the media is rife with stories of children being abducted and abused. Thus, has been born the "electronic babysitter".

I have nieces and nephews who work from home that plant their children in front of a computer, Kindle, or television screen to watch endless videos or games while they work. As "screens" are so stimulating, children become addicted to them. Parents often have to fight their children to get them off their screens or intervene when their children are fighting over screen time. Bedtimes can become a struggle on two fronts. The child is in the middle of their favorite game or video and refuses to get off. Second, he or she is so overstimulated that they have no desire or are unable to settle down and go to sleep. I have even seen parents and children on their phones or screens while sitting down to a family dinner. The lack of meaningful interaction between children and between children with their parents is obvious.

The lack of parent-child interaction has significant consequences for the child's emotional development. Young children act on their emotions behaviorally. When their younger sibling hogs the Nintendo, they may push or hit. The younger child then acts out their anger by hitting back or show their frustration by crying to mom. How many times have parents turned to their children and said, "don't hit...use your words". As a child psychologist, I tell parents that this is a purposeless phrase. The development of a child's emotional language comes from ongoing parent-child interactions where the parent helps the child find the words that connect

with their emotions. It is also up to parents to make it safe for the child to express their emotional words by being what I have termed a Soothing Presence.

A Soothing Presence in its simplest form is someone who is okay when you are not. When adults think about who they turn to when upset or stressed, it is inevitably someone who will listen calmly and not get upset themselves. These are usually family members or friends who care about them and don't interfere as they speak about the stresses in their lives.

Children also need a Soothing Presence. This is the role parents must play when comforting their child. But then they run into the problems mentioned above. Parents are stressed and preoccupied with their jobs. They feel all alone in coping with their children as their spouse is often at their own workplace and not available to help out. As many jobs require relocation, the parents no longer have other resources like grandparents or siblings to give them a respite from their own stresses. It is difficult for the working stay-at-home parent to be a Soothing Presence when they are stressed out themselves. Often, they will tell their child, "not now... can't you see I am working?" Or the proverbial "wait 'til your father (mother) gets home." When the child misbehaves. Neither response helps the child cope with their own stress nor provides the opportunity for the child to develop and use an emotional language.

Without an emotional language, children will continue to act on their emotions behaviorally. This leads to parents imposing ongoing consequences to the acting-out child hoping they will "learn their lesson". Without an emotional language, the child continues to act on his or her emotions behaviorally leading parents to increase the severity of consequences in hopes the child will finally "get it". Not only does this make the child increasingly resentful ("why is it always my fault?") but it makes the child loathe to talk to their parents for fear of greater and greater punishment. Thus, the child comes to realize that it is unsafe to talk to their parent about their emotions and their acting-out behavior persists. As the consequences get more severe it becomes increasingly difficult for there to be effective communication between parent and child. If this dynamic persists into adolescence, it often results in a power struggle where the child eventually does not care about their parents' imposed consequences and figures out ways to get around them.

The consequences of a lack of emotional language can be most dire. I tell parents I see in treatment that a temper tantrum in a five-year-old can be dealt with. However, a temper tantrum in a 17-year-old can lead to jail time! Somehow, the child needs to develop an emotional language so that he or she can cope with stress through verbal expression rather than behavior. In children, this verbal capacity is called resilience. In adults, it is called stress tolerance.

Parents need to understand that one of the things that children pick up from them is how to react to stress. If a parent's reaction to stress (their own or their child's) is anger, defensiveness or aggression, the child will often start reacting in a similar fashion. This is not actually learned behavior. Rather, the child takes in these reactions by a process called Internalization.

Internalization is a process where reactions are acquired on a subconscious level. Internalization causes people to react without thinking. As our reaction is subconscious, we often do not have the words to explain it. A common example of an internalized, non-thinking

response is what occurs when we overreact to a situation. Often, we feel embarrassed when we cannot find the words to explain why we reacted so intensely. A more accurate term for this type of intense reaction is “self-conscious”. We become consciously aware of a part of ourselves that we were not aware of before and cannot explain in words. A more serious example of an internalized response is the abused child who becomes an abusive parent. Often these parents will be sincere in their determination to never do to their own children what happened to them growing up. Yet, when overly stressed, they can find themselves getting physical in response to the stress caused by their children’s behavior. They may regret what they did later, but the cycle of reacting to stress by aggression is then internalized by the next generation.

In contrast, a child who has had a Soothing Presence in their lives, internalizes the capacity to soothe themselves when stressed. This in turn will be internalized by their own children and so on through the generations. This is a wonderful legacy to bestow on our children. This is why I tell all the parents I see in my clinical practice this important part of parenting.

“The best gift you can give your children is to be okay yourself”.

For the parent to be “okay” often requires changes in lifestyle that may be difficult for families. Job situations may need to be modified. This can be helped by businesses understanding the emotional needs of their employees by providing childcare and mental health benefits. Parents limiting their work hours (if possible) and understanding the need to be a Soothing Presence for each other and their children would have huge benefits for family life by providing a safe environment for the expression of emotions. Outside resources such as friends and family can help relieve parent’s emotional stress. Childcare can also be very beneficial. Parents need to seek out these resources for the good of themselves and their children.

Hillary Clinton once said, “It takes a village to raise a child”. I would modify this by saying, “It takes a village to have a healthy family life”.