

# STRESS AND THE GIFTED CHILD

By Mimi Wellisch

It may be hard to believe, but a little adversity has been found to build resilience in children, in a similar way to the immune system being strengthened through exposure to a small amount of germs. This is just as well, because it would be an unusual childhood that remains unmarred by even the slightest traumatic event. It is only when one such event is followed swiftly by several others that it becomes a stressful experience, and stress can become a serious problem, resulting in depression and illness.

Nevertheless, stress is a very personal experience, and we all individually have our own level of tolerance to life's pressures. What I may regard as stressful could be a stimulating event for you, or even considered to be amusing by yet another person.

## So how do gifted children experience stress?

On the whole, gifted children tend to feel things more than others. It is as if they have all their senses tuned an extra notch or two higher, and at times it seems as if they have more than five senses!

Such sensitivity is bound to result in experiencing the world as an assault upon one or more of their senses, at least part of the time.

Let me explain:

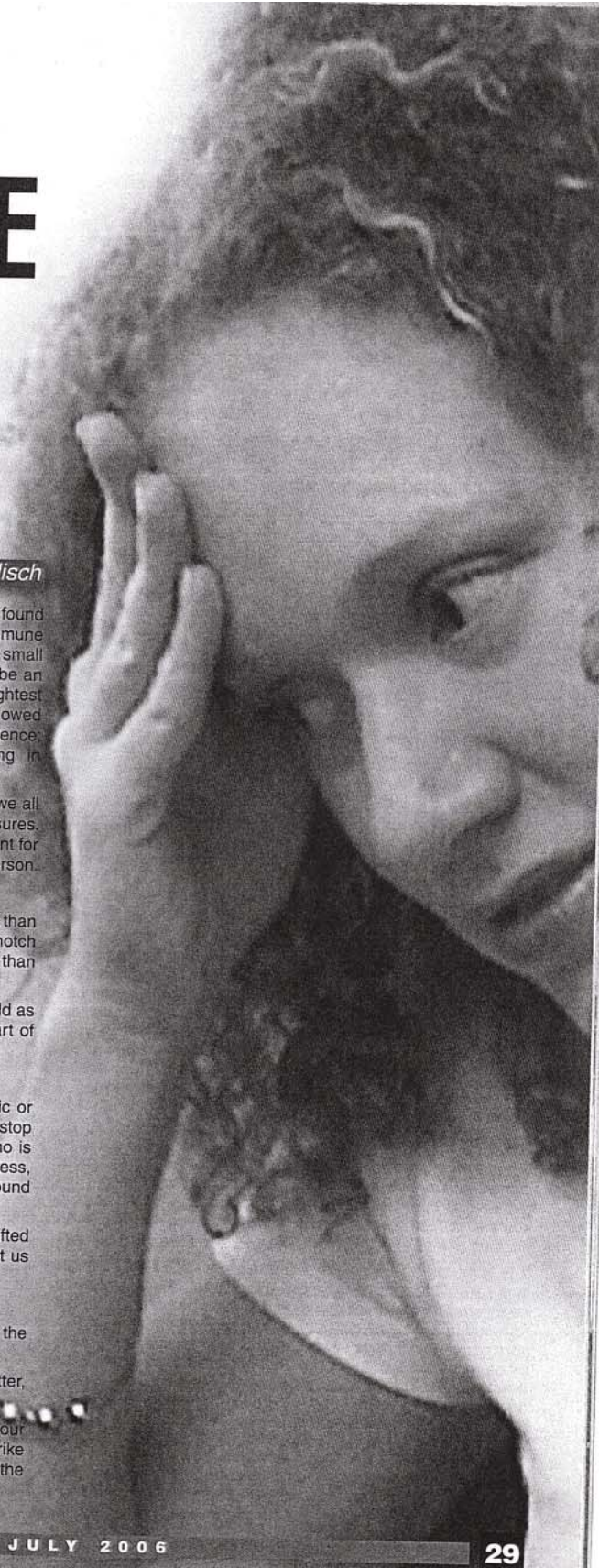
A musically gifted child may find particular forms of music or sounds unbearably grating, so much so that they want it to stop immediately. If this cannot be arranged, or if the adult who is with them is unaware of the cause and depth of the distress, then the continued exposure to the offending sound is bound to cause stress to the child.

Before looking more closely at how stress affects gifted children and what can be done to relieve the problems, let us have a look at what stress is.

## What is stress?

Stress is, as the term suggests, pressure – in this case, on the human system. In a time of stress we have three choices:

1. Coping – we tell ourselves that things will soon get better, or ask for help or talk to someone about our problem.
2. Fighting or taking flight – our bodies start to perspire, our muscles tense up, and our hearts race, ready to strike out, to blame, or if all else fails, to physically escape the situation.



3. Giving up – psychologist Martin Seligman first discovered the condition of 'learned helplessness' This is a state that occurs when all avenues of escape have been tried repeatedly, and the person finally loses all hope and no longer tries to escape, even when a way out does present itself.

During stress, the Cerebrum, a more recently developed part of the brain that controls such things as sensing, learning and thinking, begins to shut down, turning over functions to the older Limbic (emotional) system (Weiten, 1998). Higher forms of learning during stress are therefore inhibited. Interestingly, the most recently developed part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex is also largely out of action during periods of stress, and in the case of young children, constant stress (including abuse) may prevent the development of all the complex functions housed in this area that are essential for a 'humane' human being, as well as the development of intuition, planning, organising, creativity, insight, empathy and introspection, skills and characteristics found in many gifted children.

Let us now look at the types of stressors experienced by gifted children:

#### The alert (and awake) baby

Many gifted children start out their lives very alert and mostly awake. They can get wound up and frustrated because they are unable to do very much and yet



are very stimulated and excited about their environment. The period between 0-2 months is the time babies first notice forms. It is important that babies have the opportunity to observe changing patterns in the environment during this time. But beware of over-stimulating the infant (Wesley & Sullivan, 1980). If over-stimulation is a rule rather than the exception in the life of a young child, subtle stimuli is likely to be blocked out, and the baby will be drawn to stronger stimuli, much like taste buds that are used to strong flavours

being unimpressed by finer ones. The consequence of this is that sensitivity, a major trait in gifted children, is likely to be impaired. An example of over-stimulation is a steady stream of visitors to the home of a new-born; loud and constant music; and ever-changing scenery.

#### What you can do

It has been found that stroking and general physical contact increases a baby's digestive juices and reduces stress. Play games with baby involving stroking and other physical games. You can choose some nursery rhymes that lend themselves to stroking games.

It is important to be aware of the baby's reactions to stimuli, and to be responsive to signs of distress. Gratification of needs and therefore less tension in infants has been reported to result in a greater capacity to handle stress (Clark, 1992). You can remove toys, if over-stimulation seems to be the problem, or take baby out of the house. Babies often calm down outside. You can also practise your assertiveness skills on well-meaning visitors and ensure that they only come when invited, and leave before the baby is overwhelmed.

#### Child care and the gifted child

As gifted children are generally more emotionally sensitive, separation from a parent is likely to be a major stressor. In

addition to this, gifted children prefer adult company, and enjoy one-on-one interactions. These opportunities are clearly going to be in short supply in a child care centre, where child numbers can reach 90, and where adult:child ratios are 5 babies to one adult, 8 toddlers to one adult and 10 preschoolers to one adult. Babies and children who are constantly stressed are in survival mode, and therefore have limited capacity to learn, which may put the gifted status of your child at risk ('use it or lose it'). Stress can be caused by unmet needs, including the need to be with a loving parent or by a perceived threat in the environment. You can tell that your child is stressed from attending child care through the following new or increased behaviours:

- Frequent tantrums
- Anger at parents when they return (shouting, hitting, kicking) or alternatively, ignoring the parent and resisting going home
- Biting
- Headaches and stomach aches
- Withdrawal
- Acting out or oppositional behaviour
- Change in appetite
- Change in sleeping pattern

#### What you can do

If you can afford to return to work when the child is older, then that is the best option. Children naturally develop less need for their parents by around 4 years of age, when they have learnt to communicate well (Marvin, & Britner, 1999). Until then you won't need to be concerned about your child's need for other children's company – this can be met by you both attending playgroups, visiting with other families and going for excursions to museums and parks.

Alternatively, if possible, returning to part time work is preferable to your child being in care full time.

#### Perfectionism

Gifted children tend to produce their own brand of stress, mostly caused by a need to be perfect at everything they do. 'Perfect' is often a very personal thing, though, because what would be OK for me may be terrible for you. It is difficult to persuade a gifted child that what they have produced is 'good enough', because they have their own view of what makes something perfect. A gifted child clearly has something in mind and what they produce often falls short of their vision.

This then results in paper baskets filled with still-born creations that never see the light of day, no matter what potential they might have had. Another problem with perfectionism is that many gifted children conclude that it is safer not even to try, as they are convinced they will never be able to produce something perfect. They are therefore frozen into inaction, unable to have a go at new experiences, in case they fail.

#### What you can do?

Such perfectionistic ideas are clearly not productive and feed into a loop of ever-poorer self esteem. In such cases it is important to talk about 'reaching for the stars so you can get to the top of the trees', as my son's mathematics tutor used to tell him. The idea is not to necessarily reach perfection, but to **attempt** to reach it, and produce excellent works in the process. Gifted children need to hear this often, because although they are usually quick at picking up ideas, they tend to forget that the act of trying your best is all that is needed. They need this idea repeated over and over again.

It is also useful to explain – and just as well most gifted children are logical – how much slower their bodies develop in comparison to their minds. The mind is quick and the body is slow, similar to the difference between the speed of light and the speed of sound during a lightning storm. They have to remember to be patient with their bodies and keep practising skills, and in the meantime making do with what they are able

to achieve. Perhaps writing down or sketching a particular visionary idea can be a solution until their bodies are better skilled at translating thought into the exact matching creation.

### **Boredom**

Another common cause of stress for gifted children is the daily grind of sitting in a classroom or a child care centre and feeling totally disengaged by the repetitive curriculum or program. A child may be disengaged for various reasons, as boredom means different things to different individuals. Factors may include what is happening at the time or the topic at hand, the pace, the teacher's style, mode of presentation and whether the gifted child's contribution is appreciated. Bored gifted children may feel stressed and anxious, concerned that there must be something wrong with them seeing as their peers appear to be happy and interested, and this may lead to less self-confidence, and even depression.

#### *What you can do?*

Let us assume that you have met with the teacher who is not convinced that your child is gifted, and is refusing to change the curriculum for your child. What can be done?

You could ask the child to help you work out how he or she can make school time become more interesting. Try asking the child to imagine they have a magic wand and three wishes. If they could wave this wand and have what they wanted at school, what would these be? Depending on their answer, you could coach them to have a couple of contingency plans ready to combat their boredom. For example:

- The child could extend an activity they have been asked to do, once they have completed the set task.
- Or perhaps the child could go on to work on his or her 'project' brought from home.
- Or they may possibly be able to negotiate an additional research task with their teacher once they finish the task she has set.

Finally, if all else fails, look for a school that will accommodate your child's educational needs.

### **Stress and media violence**

Exposure to media violence is a violation of children's human rights (UNICEF, 1990), of their soul, toughening up of their naturally empathetic nature and hardening their sensitive little hearts. I have seen cases where young children seemed to have acquired Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from watching graphically violent acts on TV without adult guidance (Wellisch, 2001). In some cases they were exposed to these 'M' rated movies as a treat at school and at parties without their parents' permission.

Children are often unable to differentiate (although they say they understand) fantasy from reality, which includes fantasy watched on television. Images are very difficult to erase from one's mind. Although there are surprisingly many who defend media violence and refuse to acknowledge its detrimental effect on children, advertisers are not known to invest in uncertainty. They know how impressionable children are, and businesses spend billions of advertising dollars that pays off handsomely. The American Psychology Association has grave concern about the amount of media violence available to children, including the interactive variety.

#### *What you can do?*

Cut down on the television viewing and video games as much as possible. Watch with your child wherever possible and discuss what you see. For instance, this is a good time to question how a killing 'hero' can be a goodie, while a killing 'anti-hero' can be a baddie. Brainstorm with your child about peaceful solutions that may have been more beneficial than what was shown on the film, or better options than what was available on the video game.

### **Family stressors**

Almost every family weathers storms from time to time, and a loss certainly put a strain on everyone. Divorces or deaths



often leave children with the mistaken belief that it was somehow their fault. Take Ben, for instance, whose father died when he was 9, just weeks after he had borrowed some money that he had failed to pay back prior to his father's passing. He concluded in his own mind that his father died because he did not pay him back. This is called 'magical thinking', and many children engage in this type of thought.

#### *What you can do?*

First you must listen and accept the child's concerns or thoughts. Next you could ask them whether they are equally powerful in other situations. Again, it is helpful that gifted children are mostly logical, and a child may concede that such power is not usually available to them. "...And wasn't Dad sick before you borrowed the money? Dad loved you a lot - wouldn't he want you to have that money?" may be good questions to help anchor the child's guilt in reality. The same type of questioning is useful in the case of divorce.

### **Conclusion**

We have been looking at stress and its particular impact on the lives of sensitive children. As life is constantly changing, stress will always be a likely companion in our lives, and some people cope with changes and stress better than others. Gifted children can be helped to cope with stress through learning to be patient with themselves, through increased self knowledge and through advocacy, commitment and the loving guidance of their families.

### **References**

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Additional information on the effects of media violence can be downloaded from the American Psychological Association's website: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

*Mimi Wellisch is a registered psychologist, a gifted consultant, an early childhood specialist and a published author. Mimi can be contacted through the web address at [www.cleverkidsconsultancy.com](http://www.cleverkidsconsultancy.com)*