

Does your child need to downshift?

As a parent, how do you spot the signs of stress in your child? When is it time to intervene and to help your child simplify their life?

10 years ago this year I was in a terrible quandary. Both of my sons were showing signs of stress. My youngest son (then age 6), who was born partially sighted, was bored in school, reluctant to attend or participate in lessons and falling asleep in class in the afternoons. My oldest son meanwhile (then age 8) was off his food, having problems sleeping and talking of committing suicide. It was when I found myself removing the cord from his dressing gown in order to hide it from him, that I suddenly woke up to his and his brother's distress.

What are the major signs of stress to look out for in your child?

Having trouble sleeping or having nightmares.

Loss of appetite

Deterioration in behaviour

Obsessive behaviour patterns (e.g. repeatedly washing hands)

Hyperalertness

Spacing out

Not wanting to engage in activities they usually enjoy.

Weepiness

Regression, e.g. thumb sucking, more dependent behaviour than usual.

Fear of the dark or being left alone.

Repeated or persistent illness, skin complaints, asthma etc

Bed-wetting

Causes of Stress in Children.

There are many individual incidents or situations that can result in stress in children. Whilst one-off events such as a house move, divorce, death or birth in the family are likely to cause peaks in stress, it is the persistent, unrelenting stresses that may result in most harm to the child in the longer term. These can originate from bullying, or from a child's social, emotional or physical needs not being met. In our case, it was the fact that the boys' educational needs were not being met in school and that my oldest son was being bullied relentlessly that was causing their problems. In addition to that, their hours spent in school and two afternoons a week at a childminder's while I worked meant that we were not spending enough hours together as a family. Even for those children who are happy at school, the sheer volume of timetabled structure in their day, once you add on out-of-school clubs and classes, can be just too much to bear.

How do you encourage your child to downshift?

If you suspect that your child is living in a junior version of the Rat Race, there are things you can do to help relieve their stress and simplify their lives:

1. Speak with them about how they spend their days and weeks and what causes them to feel tense, angry, rushed, afraid, tearful etc. (You might like to read my article "Listening to our Children" - www.sallylever.co.uk/articles/Listening%20to%20our%20children.pdf)
2. Rather than focussing on the symptoms of stress e.g. bed-wetting, just focus on eliminating the causes and the symptoms will usually then take care of themselves.
3. Re-consider how much time your child has to just chill out and do nothing – time to just "be." Having time to relax is just as important for them as it is for you.
4. How much time does your child need to spend alone? Just like adults, children have different social needs and perhaps will need to be encouraged to cut down on their social activities in order to de-stress.
5. If the major causes of your child's stress seem to emanate from school and the stress persists despite you trying to resolve the problems, then another possibility is to consider alternative forms of education e.g. a small school, Steiner or Montessori school, home education.

For us, the solution was for me to start home educating my two sons and to stop working for a few years, in order to concentrate on their education and their health and wellbeing.

I'm pleased to say that within 3 months of taking my sons out of school, they were both back to their old selves and all the symptoms of stress had miraculously disappeared.

Walking Your Talk.

One thing I quickly realised when I began encouraging my sons to downshift was that there's not a lot of point in attempting to downshift your child's life if you're showing signs of leading a stressful life yourself! Many parents benefit from reviewing their pace of life and their opportunities to chill out and slow down a little, even when their children are not living in the Junior Rat Race. When you're child is stressed, this can be an especially good opportunity to review your own life. Many children are so closely bonded emotionally to their parents that their behaviour can project their parents' stresses as much as their own. So you might well find that just by simplifying your own life, your child begins to unwind too.

Conclusion.

Children do not need to stay on the treadmill any more than we do as adults. There are alternative, less stressful, more enjoyable ways of living. When we, as parents, are willing to put family and wellbeing first and step off the treadmill, we are demonstrating to our offspring how to lead a less stressful, more meaningful life.

Suggested Further Reading:

Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens - 12 Sessions on Stress Management and Lifeskills Development by Earl Hipp and Michael Fleishman

Don't Pick on Me: How to Handle Bullying. By Rosemary Stones.

In Their Own Way. By Thomas Armstrong

Listening to Our Children. By Sally Lever. (See the articles page on my website)

How is Home Education Sustainable? By Sally Lever. (See the articles page on my website.)

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Sally Lever is a Sustainable Living Coach who specializes in supporting and inspiring those who are downshifting or otherwise moving towards a more sustainable way of life. She offers one-to-one coaching, teleclasses in "How to step off the treadmill" and a free email newsletter.