

Kids Suffer Anxiety Up To 6 Months Before Starting School

05 Sep 2007

The first few days at school can be an anxious time as children face the challenge of a new environment and making new friends but according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, children show signs of stress three to six months before term even starts.

The researchers, led by Dr Julie Turner-Cobb at the University of Bath, were studying the effect of children's temperament and behaviour on how stressful they found the experience of starting school.

To do this, they measured the levels of the stress hormone cortisol in children two weeks after they had started primary school and then measured them again six months later. They also took cortisol measurements three to six months before the children started school to provide baseline levels for comparison.

But the researchers were surprised to find that, far from providing a baseline, children's cortisol levels were already high several months before the start of the school term. "This suggests that stress levels in anticipation of starting school begin to rise much earlier than we expected", says Dr Turner-Cobb.

Why a preschool child should be anxious about an event so far in the future is something of a mystery but Dr Turner-Cobb speculates that parents were getting stressed about their children starting school and that their stress was being passed on to the children.

Whilst there was a significant rise in cortisol levels at the start of school as expected, children with a more shy, fearful personality appeared less stressed than their more extrovert peers.

"More extroverted children had consistently higher levels of cortisol and their levels tended to remain high throughout the day, possibly because their more impulsive nature gets them into more confrontational situations", Dr Turner-Cobb explains.

One of the concerns surrounding cortisol is that high levels, particularly when they remain high throughout the day, can suppress an individual's immune response making them more susceptible to everyday illnesses.

But in this study, the researchers found that children who had higher levels of cortisol throughout the day when starting school were actually less likely to suffer from cold symptoms during the next six months and had fewer days off sick if they did catch a cold.

They also found that these children were more likely to get sick during the school holidays than at term time suggesting that, at least in the short-term, higher stress levels provide some protection against colds and flu.

For most children, stress levels had lowered significantly at the six months follow-up, suggesting that they had adapted well to the school environment. As Dr Turner-Cobb is keen to emphasise, this temporary stress response to starting school is natural and experiences such as this help shape a child's ability to cope with new and potentially threatening situations through life.

However, some children still had high cortisol levels throughout the day at follow-up, suggesting that they were experiencing a more long-term stress response that could lead to poorer health. These children were more extroverted but had also become increasingly socially isolated during the study, perhaps because their peers had lost patience with their exuberance.

According to Dr Turner-Cobb, this highlights the importance of monitoring the experiences of children starting school, particularly those who seem to find the school environment more of a social challenge.

Given the unexpected high levels of cortisol months in advance of the start of term, Dr Turner-Cobb also suggests that parents may need more support to reduce their anxiety about the experience of school transition, so benefiting the health and social well-being of the child.

Article adapted by Medical News Today from original press release.

1. The research project 'The Social Experience of Transition to School: Learning and Health Outcomes' was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The researchers were Dr Julie Turner-Cobb and Ms Lorna Rixon at the Department of Psychology, University of Bath. <http://www.bath.ac.uk/news/multimedia/?1172593800>

2. Methodology. The study involved 105 children starting reception class in schools in Bath and the surrounding areas in September 2004 or January 2005. Parents completed a set of questionnaires about their child's behaviour and personality and collected small samples of their child's saliva before, during and after they started school. Cortisol levels in the saliva samples were measured by Dr David Jessop at the University of Bristol. Parents also kept a diary of their child's health for the first six months after starting school and children's schoolteachers (74 in all) completed questionnaires detailing the child's behaviour and character two weeks and six months after starting school.

3. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest funding agency for research and postgraduate training relating to social and economic issues. It supports independent, high quality research relevant to business, the public sector and voluntary organisations. The ESRC's planned total expenditure in 2007- 08 is £181 million. At any one time the ESRC supports over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and research policy institutes. More at <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/>

4. ESRC Society Today offers free access to a broad range of social science research and presents it in a way that makes it easy to navigate and saves users valuable time. As well as bringing together all ESRC-funded research (formerly accessible via the Regard website) and key online resources such as the Social Science Information Gateway and the UK Data Archive, non-ESRC resources are included, for example the Office for National Statistics. The portal provides access to early findings and research summaries, as well as full texts and original datasets through integrated search facilities. More at <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/>

5. The ESRC confirms the quality of its funded research by evaluating research projects through a process of peer review. This research has been graded as 'good'.

Source: Danielle Moore
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