

## Stress: Why are our kids so anxious?

### Some children live with adults who can often unload their stresses on to them, says Professor Tanya Byron

The Office for National Statistics says that 10 per cent of 5 to 16-year-olds — about one million children and young people in the UK — have a clinically diagnosed mental health problem. Of that proportion, a significant number will be suffering from anxiety and depression — and, according to the charity Young Minds, the number is rising.

Children react in different ways depending often on age. Common causes of stress in children are well known: bullying, peer pressure, bereavement, academic demands and unhappy family lives all play a part. But some may live with adults who can often unload their stresses on to them. In the very young it can be expressed via wetting or soiling behaviour, extreme temper outbursts or becoming overly clingy and fearful. As children get older stress manifests itself in other ways: obsessional behaviours and compulsive rituals; hair, eyelash and eyebrow pulling (trichotillomania); sudden aggression; and restrictive or excessive eating.

By puberty, behaviours start to conform to gender, with boys mostly directing their stress outwards (aggression, violence) and girls becoming more self-destructive (self-harming or eating disorders). The increase in alcohol and drug use among this age group also suggests that many young people are suffering stress.

The stereotype of children under pressure is of those from deprived backgrounds — angry and antisocial. However, there is also a hidden population of children from more comfortable families who are pushed by competitive and aspirational parents and lead heavily supervised lives who also show high levels of stress and anxiety.

Learning to manage anxiety is one that we should develop in our children from a young age. Teaching children to manage stress is as important as teaching them to eat well, sleep well and stay physically healthy. To cope, a child needs to understand stress as a “normal” feeling. One useful exercise is to trace around the child on a large piece of paper and then draw on to the body where we feel stress and how — headaches, unable to sleep, butterflies in the tummy, etc. Ask children to talk about when they have those feelings and tell them about your experiences. Then help them to learn skills to manage their stress: they should tell people how they feel, take some steady breaths, blow out imaginary birthday cake candles, keep a journal, distract themselves, take some time out and play a game or listen to music.

Those children who “blow” quickly need to identify the first feelings of stress — such as a knot in the tummy — and learn to indicate how far they are in the stress reaction. I have used cards for this: green (OK), yellow (feeling tight), red (ready to blow).

Anxiety makes everything bigger than it is, but children can be distracted from rising stress levels by using simple techniques, such as counting backwards in threes from 100. But they also need to challenge negative beliefs (“I hate my body”) and learn to think positively (“I can do this”), which takes time and support.

It is worth looking at yourself as a role model: try to work in some relaxing time together. Make bathtimes fun and at bedtime enjoy stories, massage tired limbs and indulge in the most incredible stress-busting cuddles.