



Margaret J. Wheatley

Stressed Out Kids

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Recently, I've been noticing many disturbing indicators from the lives of American children. Here are just a few incidents that I've noted.

A New Jersey school system decided to give all children one free night with no scheduled activities. They had to plan for this six months in advance.

Elementary school children are developing back and neck problems normally not seen until adulthood. These physical ailments are caused by their school backpacks. The packs often weigh about twenty pounds; the children often weigh about 60 pounds.

Fourteen hundred college students died this past year as a consequence of binge drinking. Out-of-control college drinking on campuses has become so serious that Congressional hearings have been held about it.

My thirteen year old granddaughter explained to me how she needs to know her weekly schedule, otherwise she can't cope with the anxiety and develops headaches.

By themselves, each of these incidents might mean nothing, but together they paint a disturbing picture. I believe they are indications of the fact that children's lives have become miniature versions of our own adult lives. We seem to be acculturating our children to be constantly busy, to be burdened by schedules, to become so stressed that they seek inappropriate ways to release that stress. Long before they start school, children develop schedules of their own, moving from one coordinated activity or program to another. We no longer have to wait till adulthood in order to feel over-committed and overwhelmed.

I don't know if there's a solution to this frenzy of activity amongst all ages. But I believe we should notice what's happening to our children. How comfortable are our children with unstructured time? Do they experience moments of quiet, of just being in the moment? How do they feel when their plans fall apart? What's their response to boredom and loneliness?

Lest I sound like a crabby old lady, let me tell you why I started noticing these things. I spend a great deal of time with teen-agers, partly because I have two at home, and partly because they're both in the same rock band, and I often travel to concerts and clubs where they're performing. I also have thirteen grandchildren. And my work brings me into daily contact with many adults in different professions and work places. During the past few years, I've watched

the levels of stress, anxiety, conflict and craziness keep rising in all these different age groups.

There are many indicators of rising stress. In America and Europe, sleeping disorders are on the rise, rage and abuse are on the rise. More diseases are appearing that are linked to nervous conditions. One European health survey predicted that within the next twenty years, the leading causes of death would be from diseases of the heart and of the nervous system. And stress and anxiety have invaded the lives of children. Teachers report greater anxiety in students. Some of this is a manifestation of their parents' stress; some of it is caused by the demands placed on kids. Increasingly, greater numbers of children are medicated in order to quiet them down, and to help them stay focused.

From what I observe, American society is speeding up to such a frenzied state that any day now, I expect to witness a human being exploding in front of me. And when this frenzy starts to affect our children, when we seem unconsciously to be creating them in our own image, I get worried. It's been a slow creeping change in our children's lives, another example of the boiled frog who didn't notice the water temperature rising. When did it become normal for kids to have so many commitments in their lives that they require their own schedules and day planners? When did we develop the expectation that kids should do so many activities: school work, organized league sports, school clubs, music, dance or sports lessons, paying jobs, and active social lives? It's no wonder that many high school students report they stay up doing homework until after midnight. Homework is the last obligation at the end of a day of non-stop activities. And parents of young children are encouraged to get them involved in structured programs and lessons even before they begin school. (Let me confess--I had one son in swimming lessons at six months. One daughter-in-law teaches music and rhythm to children one to three years of age.)

Most parents I know are not happy with keeping pace with their kids demanding schedules. Early evenings and week-ends are spent shuttling kids to their soccer or Little League games or school activities. It's no wonder we can't wait for them to be able to drive. But even if we want to slow things down and give our kids some relief, most of them don't want it.

As hassled and fatigued as our kids may be, they've grown dependent on feeling busy. They've learned to schedule their days down to the minute in order to fit in everything. They don't like or know what to do with down time. Several of the students interviewed in New Jersey found that the free evening given to all kids in their community was boring. They felt confined by "free" time.

So changing our kids' lives is very complex. They don't know what they're missing. And peer pressure is real. Therefore, we can't act individually as parents and insist that only our kids participate in fewer activities. If we ask them to withdraw from "normal" activities, they'll only feel strange and different, and alienated from us as parents. The community in New Jersey realized that this was a community issue and made an attempt to address it at that level.

Because this is a community issue, I believe we need to start the conversation with other parents, and with school administrators. If we share our own experiences, we can help each other notice what's going on. Then together we can determine what we might initiate as a community to ease up on our kids. I hope we don't have to wait until our children reach adulthood for them to discover, as we may have done, that a healthy life requires peaceful

moments, and that being present in the moment is a wondrous skill.

I hope we can teach them that plans are not the answer to all of life's needs, that there is truth to the old joke that if you want to make God laugh, just present your plans. I hope we can teach them to expect moments of chaos when everything falls apart, and to dance with those moments rather than fear them. I hope we can teach them to not be afraid of boredom and loneliness, so that they stop grasping after entertainment, drugs, or alcohol to fill the void. Loneliness, boredom, restlessness-these are conditions of being human. No matter how much we deny them or run from them, they always return. As we mature, hopefully we learn that we don't need to fill the emptiness, that we can just sit with it and it will pass.

But I wonder how my children are learning these fundamental life lessons.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: margaretwheatley.com. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio