Two Different Studies Show the Physical Damage Extreme Stress Does to Children

By Antoinette McGowan, published Mar 14, 2007

Stress has long been known to be harmful to a person's health. Now a study published March 5th, shows that children in families facing chronic stress such as conflict between parents or violence in the home become sick more often than children under less stress.

Dr. Mary Caserta at the University of Rochester Medical Center in Rochester, New York led a group of researchers, who tracked the incidence of fevers in 169 children ages 5-10 from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

It was unclear the reason why children from stressful families experienced fevers more often, according to researchers. The study did show that children from stressful homes had a stronger immune system. Blood samples showed that these children had stronger functioning of certain key cells in the immune system.

Researchers were seeking a greater understanding of the effect of chronic stress on children's health.

Caserta said during an interview, "I think people on the street believe this unflinchingly-stress makes you sick."

The parents of the children were required to track chronically stressful events in the family and their own symptoms over the course of the study. They had to keep a diary of their kids' health and were given a digital thermometer.

A list of stressful conditions included conflict in the home, parental anxiety and depression, parental poverty and unemployment along with violence in the home or neighborhood.

The study was published in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine. It found that the children under stress experienced more fevers than other children.

US scientists also have discovered that stress can damage a child's brain. Stress has been shown in studies to raise levels of a stress hormone called cortisol. Cortisol has been shown to kill hippocampus cells in animals. Now researchers are linking this to withered hippocampus in children.

Pediatrics journal reports that a withered hippocampus may make a child less able to deal with stress and raise anxiety.

Lead researcher at the Stanford University Medical Center, Victor Carrion said that the stress had to be extreme to cause the damage. "We are not talking about the stress of doing your homework or fighting with your dad," Dr Carrion said.

It will take more research on both of these studies to see exactly how much stress does to children. Clearly it is already showing signs that extreme amounts of stress in a child are far from healthy. Researchers are still a ways away from finding out just what long-term physical damage extreme stress is doing to these young children.

Sources:

BBC News:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/6411351.stm
Reuters:

I have no doubt stress in the home causes depression and anxiety.

Posted on 04/01/2007 at 2:04:00 PM
Leigh Vaughn

Thank you for bringing attention to this. Parents of children or teens who notice signs of stress should definitely mention it to their child's doctor. I had chronic sinus infections (and took antibiotics) for about 6 months until a doctor or naturopathy suggested that we treat the stress. I have not had another in 7 1/2 years. My regular doctor may have been able to help if she had known, or if we had known to discuss it with her.

Posted on 03/16/2007 at 5:03:00 AM
Question: Everything

sheesh, I hate stress. Thanks for this article, want to read the full report now.

Posted on 03/14/2007 at 5:03:00 PM
Sophia S.

this would be very tricky to study and relying on parental reports of stressors to their kids would not be especially reliable. But I am glad you wrote about this. It is very interesting to read.

Posted on 03/14/2007 at 5:03:00 PM
Carol Gilbert

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