

Stress and Executive Skills: A Message for Teachers

Executive skills are brain-based skills, managed out of the frontal lobes, that develop slowly across childhood. Simply, they are the skills required to *execute tasks*, including both foundational skills such as task initiation, response inhibition and sustained attention as well as more advanced skills such as planning, time management, organization, and goal-directed persistence. In the best of times—and in students without learning challenges—they take a minimum of 25 years to reach full maturation. For students with learning challenges, that timetable is generally delayed to start with, and more susceptible to disruption.

Until they are fully developed, adults act as surrogate frontal lobes for kids. Teachers do this by providing schedules, structures, and routines, by maintaining contact with students to help them manage time and tasks. When the structure of school is removed, many students with weak, fragile, or immature executive skills flounder.

But in times of stress, such as the current pandemic, *everyone's* executive skills are taxed, including parents and teachers. In technical terms, here's how stress impacts executive skills:

Stress biases cognition to process information that is most directly related to the current stressor... Stress is thus thought to reallocate finite executive control resources to deal with the stressor at hand; cognitive resources normally devoted to working memory and cognitive flexibility would be funneled to selective attention (i.e., inhibition) in order to enhance the ability to focus on the current stressor (Shields, Sazm, and Yonelinas, 2016).

In laypersons' terms, this means that the brain is hard-wired to focus on the immediate situation and whatever is causing stress in the moment—it's the most basic survival mechanism that the human species has. Parents who are trying to work at home and supervise kids' schooling (and in many cases, they're supervising multiple kids) as well as parents who have lost their jobs and are wondering where money for food and shelter will come from may be equally taxed. And the stress that parents feel rubs off on their children.

So here's what kids may be dealing with:

- Parents who may be unavailable for support because of their own worries and concerns—and when kids understand what their parents are worried about, they worry about the same things.
- A loss of the familiarity and security of daily routines that school provided.

- A loss of access to the wide range of supports that schools give kids—including things as basic as food for some students, as well as a sense of belonging and being loved, and boosts to self-esteem—all things that teachers give kids.
- Reduction in social contact at a stage of development when peer relationships may be the most important thing in a teenager's life.
- An increased expectation that they manage their schoolwork on their own when normal routines and schedules have fallen away. Yes, kids have always had to manage homework on their own, but added demands that they structure their time to manage their entire school day, overload the system for many students.

How to Support Students in Times of Stress

- Start with the understanding that kids will do well if they can (the same is true of parents and teachers). So when students fail to follow through on tasks or meet deadlines, assume that “they would if they could” (as Ross Greene says). That means that there's an obstacle that's preventing them from acting.
- Approach the student in a problem-solving mode. Arrange to talk to the student one-on-one, and start with sympathy and an open-ended question. “This is tough for all of us. Tell me what's going on with you...” or “I noticed you missed a deadline. Can we talk about what got in the way?”
- Identify the obstacle and brainstorm with the student how to overcome the obstacle. For kids who feel overloaded, three steps that often help are: 1) breaking the task down into very small steps, each of which can be done fairly quickly; 2) making a plan with the student for completing the tasks (for kids who are particularly overwhelmed, just figuring out what to do first may be all they can handle rather than developing a plan to get through the entire assignment) and 3) checking in with them frequently to see if they are following through. Let them know that you will get back to them, and if the plan isn't working, you and they will figure out a way to revise it.
- Invite them to reach out to you at any point that they run into trouble. This will only work if they believe that you understand where they are coming from and what they're up against. “We'll get through this together, and I'm here to help,” should be the message they hear—and feel.

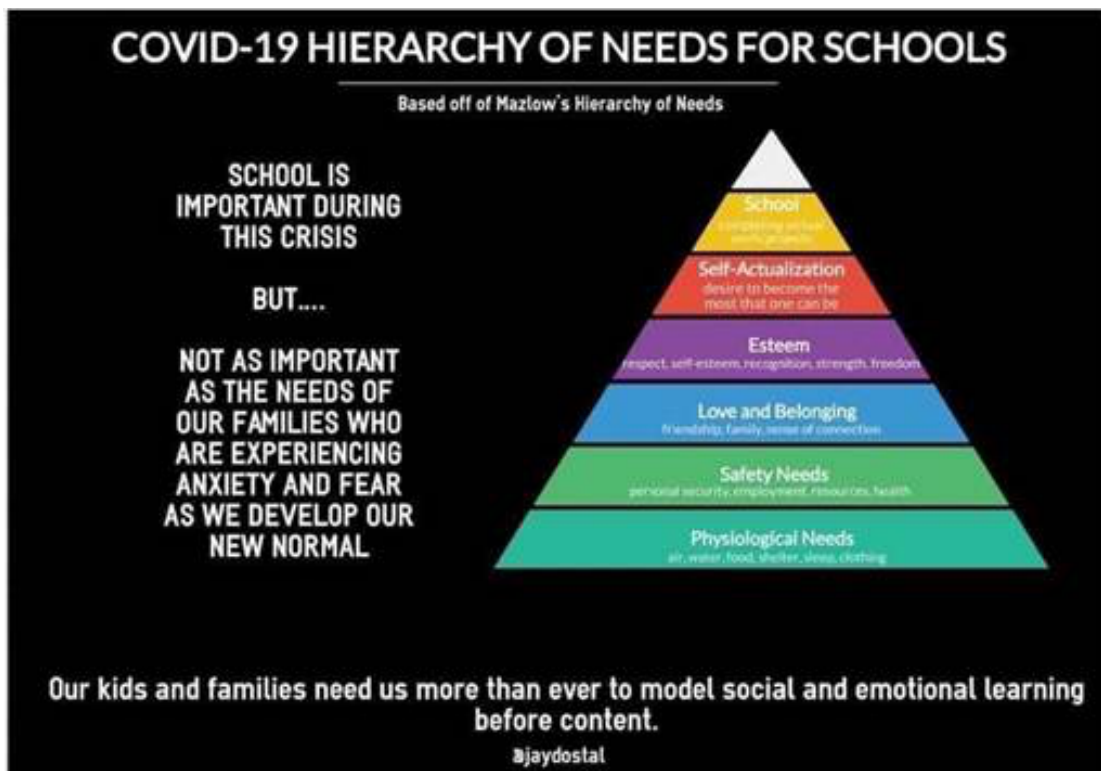
Supporting Teachers in Times of Stress

Many teachers are dealing with increased stress in their personal lives, including how to do their jobs and at the same time supervise their own children's learning. But teachers are also dealing with other work-related stressors. Transitioning to distance learning with little time for planning and perhaps limited experience with the technology required is stressful enough, but

teachers are also concerned about getting through the curriculum and figuring out how to assess students and ensure that they are ready for the next grade level.

So here are some thoughts for teachers:

- Understand how stress affects your ability to function. Remember to pat yourself on the back for just getting through the day. We often tell parents and teachers that when working with kids, if you can achieve a ratio of 3 positive statements to every corrective statement you make to a child, that alone can change behavior. That same ratio can be applied to self-talk: if you find yourself thinking or saying something negative about yourself, take a moment to think 3 positive thoughts about yourself—or identify 3 things you're thankful for.
- You're doing the best you can under the circumstances. So give yourself permission to let some things slide if you have to. And remember—virtually every school in the United States is closed down now, which means *every kid and every teacher is struggling in the same way*. If you're worried about whether your students will learn everything they need to be learning, at least understand that every kid is in the same boat.
- Believe it or not, school is NOT the most important thing right now. Keeping families healthy and intact is. So we may need to readjust priorities to ensure that that happens. Here's a graphic that puts it all in perspective:



Reference

Shields, G.S., Sazma, M. A., & Yonelinas, A.P., 2016. "[Commentary: The effects of acute stress on core executive functions: A meta-analysis and comparison with cortisol](#)" in *Front Psychol*, volume 8, 1711.

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