

Let Our Flowers Bloom

SANTOSH T SOANS

National President, Indian Academy of Pediatrics, 2018. drsoans62@gmail.com

Back in my childhood, school was the primary place for learning. For students who were weak in studies, parents who could afford the additional expenses would hire a retired teacher for after-school 'tuition classes' to their child. The practice was generally frowned upon as it implied that the child was not smart enough. Most kids would keep abreast with their class curriculum with their daily dose of home work. The better educated parents might also spend some time in providing personal coaching to the child. I'm sure similar is the experience for most of you, whichever part of India you are from.

Hence, looking around me, I am appalled at the rampant proliferation of tuition culture in our larger cities and towns. The coaching offered through this system is a far cry from the 'tuition class' of the yester years. What we see now are classrooms filled to capacity with pre-university students, and almost serving as a 'pseudo school'. Such education factories are mushrooming everywhere. Here the students are force-fed with tons of knowledge, which is clearly beyond their mental capacity to absorb, and all this in addition to the regular day classes. In Mangalore, the city where I reside in, I have heard of daily coaching regimen that commences at seven in the morning and concludes at eight in the evening with a long break in between to allow for the kids to attend pre-university classes. Good bye free time! This is almost like the unforgiving schedule that we doctors follow every day as adults. And only we know what a struggle it is to cope with the attendant stresses.

CASUALTIES OF COACHING

I understand that the main reason for this shift is the penchant among the parents for pushing their kids into Engineering, Medicine and Indian Administrative Services, which are considered to be lucrative career avenues. Even within engineering stream, there is always a desperate urge to make it to elite institutes like Indian Institute of Technology. The gateway to all these streams are the 'common entrance tests' that are considered to be among the toughest challenges for students of that age.

Hence it is thought that the extra coaching will provide the magic edge to the student to get past the post, and on to a bright future.

However, such intense drilling is not without its price. On April 30, 2016, an adolescent girl jumped off a five-storey building to end her life in Kota, Rajasthan. This 17-year-old girl was a bright student who felt pressurized by her parents into pursuing Science, a stream that she despised. Kota itself has emerged as a sort of thriving centre for coaching. This adolescent girl was one of the 150,000 students from all over India who enrol into Kota's 40 odd coaching institutes. Her tragic suicide put the focus back on the reality of teenage life today. Hers was the fifth suicide by a student that year in Kota, and it was reported at the time that at least 56 students studying in different coaching institutes in the region had committed suicide in the previous five years, with most of them attributing it to the fear of failure. In fact, the negative publicity all this had generated, made the media to dub the coaching classes as 'the stress chambers'. But Kota is only a case study in the extreme. The phenomenon is widespread all over India for the reasons already mentioned [1].

LIFE ON A SNOW SLEDGE

This makes me wonder where is the time for our kids to experience the joy of childhood? One of the most compelling messages of the importance of childhood is to be seen in Citizen Kane, a 1941 classic movie by Orson Welles, which is often rated as the best picture ever made. 'Rose Bud', the film's ingenious MacGuffin drives home the point all too well. In the last scene, as the fire illuminates a burning snow sledge with its trade name 'Rose Bud' clearly visible, in a flash we realize what made Charles Forster Kane such a colossal failure.

Roger Ebert, the late legendary film reviewer observed: "Rosebud is the emblem of the security, hope and innocence of childhood, which a man can spend his life seeking to regain. We remember that this was Kane's childhood sledge, taken from him as he was torn from his family and sent east to boarding school." Anybody who has

seen the film will not fail to relate to the poignant theme and the message. Each of us, it is often said, has 'Rosebud moments' in our lives, which signify loss of childhood and the break from family. As we grow up, we all learn to cope with them in our own ways. But what is alarming today is the industrial scale in which they are being unwittingly heaped upon on our hapless kids. It is obvious that the parents, living in an increasingly competitive world, are becoming aggressively keen to better equip their children for a perceived rat race. Tragically, in the process they are becoming blind to the repercussions of this flawed method of raising children.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA, STRESS AND ANXIETY

The most certain, yet immediately tangible, outcome of this process is the enormous pressure that our kids and teenagers are bound to feel. Dr. Tim Jordan, a leading developmental and behavioral pediatrician, writes "kids are constantly performing for and being judged by adults, with a relentless pressure to succeed, impress everyone, win, be the best, be popular, and to be special. They are constantly busy in adult-supervised activities, with little or no free, down time. All of this pressure is telling us something about how we view childhood. And I am here to tell you that childhood is not a race or a contest" [2].

Few kids have the mental ability to process this kind of stress. The unbearable emotional neglect and isolation that the present system entails is further compounded by the addictive and impersonal virtual eco-system ushered in by the social media to which children are increasingly getting exposed. Scholarly articles are scant on the subject of how childhood stress and anxiety can translate into actual problems. But the available studies indicate long-term hazards with high degree of certainty. In a study of 43 patients with major depression, using high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging Frodl, *et al.* [3] observed: "childhood neglect resulted in hippocampal white matter changes in patients with major depression, pronounced at the left side and in males. Childhood stress and brain structure volumes independently predicted cumulative illness course. Subjects with both, structural brain changes and childhood emotional neglect seem to be at a very high risk to develop a more severe illness course" [3].

MANIFESTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD STRESS

In clinical practice, we often come across manifestations of the ill effects of childhood stress and teenage stress as follows:

- Excessive introversion, aloofness
- Juvenile delinquency
- Suicidal tendency

- Excessive violence
- Substance abuse, alcohol, drugs
- Personality dysfunction
- Prostitution
- Unhealthy sexual activity / abuse
- Low self esteem
- Rebellious / reactive nature
- Bullying, getting into fights, trouble
- Psychosomatic conditions like headaches, body aches
- Chronic depression
- Bunking class, absenteeism
- Habitual lying, cheating
- Attention seeking behavior
- Unsocial and antisocial behavior
- Career instability, marital breakdown and family disharmony (in adult life)

Twenty-five percent of the adolescents in India suffer from depression according to the findings of a WHO report. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke out on the issue in his radio address "Mann Ki Baat" in March last year. This put the spotlight on the topic that was subsequently analyzed extensively in the mass media [4].

Parents should be sensitive to the early warning signs of these conditions and, if suspected, act upon them quickly and judiciously.

STRESS AND PERSONALITY

Adolescence is a formative phase of personality. Deviance as the ones listed above can permanently damage the teenager's growth process and haunt/traumatize the individual throughout life. All species of animals treat childhood as a protected period and the young enjoy considerable freedom under the watchful eyes of the parent. The chief tool of learning during childhood is play (including in animals). Through playful interaction, children gain essential life skills, which are expected to stand by them through adulthood. The interactive experiences develop cognitive abilities, intelligence and imagination, which are the chief resources we need for survival and success in the world. The cognitive resource theory (a leadership theory of industrial and organizational psychology) developed by Fred Fiedler and Joe Garcia in 1987 convincingly asserts that stress is the enemy of rationality, damaging one's ability to think logically and analytically [5].

Hence, it would be logical to conclude that exposure to stress and anxiety at a young age can have terrifying long-

term consequences. Childhood is a period for developing cognitive abilities required for avoiding stress in adult life. Exposure to stress at this developmental stage will destroy childhood itself. Parents are acting on the mistaken belief that rigorous education is the key to worldly success for their children. On this point, I must recall an impressive statement that I had heard in the course of a television debate. To a question about whether campus culture should encourage free thinking or be restrictive/disciplinarian, one of the speakers pointedly observed that while it is the old-style free-campus public universities that have produced many of our leading thinkers, artists and leaders, the new-generation highly-focused corporate educational institutions are only producing highly paid corporate robots. Thus, wealth and position are poor substitute for a creative and independent human spirit.

WHAT WE CAN DO

As pediatricians, our role extends beyond treatment of clinical symptoms. Often we are called upon to play the role of friend, philosopher and counselor. Our awareness of social and family conditions affecting child health should guide us to play a more active role in sensitizing parents regarding the need to protect their children from undue pressures. Adolescent Health Academy has a special role to play in developing the modules required to inculcate informed judgement regarding these issues among the pediatric community.

Writing on such an alarming note on our social evils, I however do not propose to paint a dystopian picture of the future of our society. On the contrary, I presuppose that the solutions to these problems are remarkably easy and natural. It requires the actors to tune in to our basic human nature, to consciously disengage from harmful external influences, accept and celebrate the joy of living.

As Dr. Tim Jordan, whom I have referred to earlier, puts it: "kids need quiet, alone time for reflection, contemplation, soul-searching, self-exploration and discovery, and to decompress. They need time to play for play's sake, learn for their love of learning, explore and challenge themselves, and to enjoy adventures. Kids must be allowed to make mistakes and to learn lessons in their own way and in their own time. Every child has their own path and destiny, and requires space and support to build their own story and future. Childhood should be so much more than a competition. Don't allow other parents and the culture to tell you otherwise" [3].

I also do not mean to deny the positive side of coaching classes – their ability to give expression to hidden potential of students and own up to their promise. Many a youth has scaled extraordinary heights of success after going through the grind. Obviously the students who fit into the coaching system will actually do well. It's only those who don't fit, need to be allowed to opt-out of the race. Parents' role is paramount in this scenario. Parents' deeper involvement is needed to understand the real aspirations of their budding teenager. This is best done through daily conversation and small talk, when the observant parent can gain valuable clues to the youngster's inclinations. They should also be pragmatic enough to accept the reality without finding the need to force their own worldview on the child. If they find that their son or daughter is not interested in a particular avenue of study and instead shows genuine liking for another field, they should accept the reality and never force or pressurize the child. While the regular schools should improve the quality of education, the coaching classes too should know their limitations and act within self-imposed parameters that ensure the long-term well-being of the students.

Children, after all, are the budding flowers of humanity. Let our flowers bloom!

REFERENCES

1. Red Alert – Rising cases of student suicides sound alarm bells across India. Hindustan Times Brand Studio 2017 May 05; India. Available from: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/brandstories/tatateajaagore/rising-cases-of-student-suicides-sound-alarm-bells-across-India.html>. Accessed March 15, 2018.
2. Jordan T. Childhood is not a Race. Available from: <https://drtimjordan.com/2014/01/childhood-is-not-a-race/>. Accessed March 15, 2018.
3. Frodl T, Reinhold E, Koutsouleris N, Reiser M, Meisenzahl EM. Interaction of childhood stress with hippocampus and prefrontal cortex volume reduction in major depression. *J Psych Res*. 2010;44:799-807.
4. Kumar S, Gupta P. Why Narendra Modi is concerned about depression among students in India. Live Mint 2017 August 01; India. Available from: <http://www.livemint.com/Science/a8O2fm0SrR4N3Ita4MROJM/Depression-is-widespread-among-students-in-India.html>. Accessed March 15, 2018.
5. Leadership-Central.com. Fiedler F, Garcia J. Cognitive Resource Theory. Available from: <http://www.leadership-central.com/cognitive-resource-theory.html#ixzz5AGXuupSY>. Accessed March 15, 2018.