



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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THE STRESSED CHILD

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This article is addressed to issues that cause stress in children, but are not outward and obvious such as illness or lack of food and shelter.

From the point of view of a child psychiatrist, separation from important members of the family (or threat of separation) is one of the major stresses of childhood, particularly in the child under three years of age. Unfortunately, cultural influences from Anglo-Saxon sources have been one of the main sources of untoward separation of young children through hospitalisation or assessment at distant places. This was in ignorance of the harmful effects of separating young children from the person they are attached to most.

Recent research has shown that new babies can smell their own mother's milk within the first week of life and at three months are focussing their eyes well and beginning to recognise particular people from both visual and auditory cues. Between three months and eight months, the child develops a strong attachment to usually only one particular person. This is a deep-seated instinctive attachment and scientists believe it is part of the species adaptation for protection of the young at a vulnerable stage of their development. It occurs in other species, such as the primates closely related to man. It is interesting that young emu chicks become attached to their father in the early hours after hatching. The important person for the child is called their 'psychological mother' (sometimes this might be a grandmother or father. Sometimes a child may become closely attached to two people rather than one.) If a child is separated from this person, the separation is not only very stressful itself, it makes other stressful things much more so: for example, many of the things that happen in a hospital such as injections and other traumatic procedures. It also has long term effects in terms of withdrawal, despair and lack of trust of others becoming established in a child's personality.

When separation occurs or is threatened, the child protests and cries for his or her "Mummy". The child's cries are very painful for those sensitive to children, and biologically have the purpose of creating anxiety to restore the child to the mother. If

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This article was originally written for *The Aboriginal Health Worker* V.4, 1, 1981.

the protest, searching and pining does not bring the mother, the infant will go into a stage of despair, sometimes only to come out of it again at the sound of a car door slamming, but then to continue often into a deep stage of despair. After some further time of despair the child may eat or play fitfully without much initiative and pass into a stage where 'detachment' is the most appropriate description. It is these phases of despair and detachment that become incorporated in the child's development and then cause secondary difficulties in their personality development later. They may have trouble becoming really close to people, or unable to show their feelings even though they may still be able to smile on the surface and not complain.

Another major stress on children is when they become very frightened, particularly when they are young and cannot understand what might happen to them. Usually this happens when they pick up grown-up's feelings, and it is always a great reassurance to them in a potentially stressful situation if their mother is giving clear messages that she is not frightened. But all too often the mother is frightened herself. This is highly stressful to the young child. They don't know what the tension is about and often imagine the situation to be much worse.

Sadly, pre-school children are frequently disturbed by factors that have come with the Anglo-Saxon culture and are now widespread. These are:

1. Having too many rules for little children so that they always find themselves breaking one and being guilty. Rules for young children need to be few, and mostly concerned with their own safety or the safety of other children.
2. Adults not spending a lot of time with children, and expecting them to understand fairly complicated talk. The tone of an adult's voice is usually more important than what they say. Affection is an effective reward for normal children.
3. Being unnecessarily harsh with children when they regress to younger forms of behaviour. Most children do this to test their feelings of security, but if this is satisfactory, they rapidly come out of regressed behaviour. It is important for the moderately disturbed child to be able to regress as this is an outlet for a lot of their tension and insecurity. When it is stopped, their behaviour usually deteriorates.

School-age children have particular stresses of their own. At this age they are very sensitive to upsets and disturbances in their family. Sometimes they become depressed and pre-occupied and are unable to concentrate on schoolwork if things are not all right at home, or if people at home are not interested in how they are going. They need somebody to care about the work they are doing.

Sometimes a child at school has been involved in a crisis such as somebody close dying, being injured or being very ill. Children often hide their grief and their feelings can be blocked and locked up inside them.

It is important to know that children learn mostly by the example of grown-ups. A parent of the same sex has a very strong influence on a child by what he or she does. For example, if a parent is involved in a particular type of behaviour the child is likely to copy or expect themselves to be like the parent. Children particularly become confused when adults put out a set of rules and yet do not themselves follow them. Adults very frequently lose their credibility this way. Particularly during adolescence, the adult remaining credible to the young person is important, and a lot of difficulties in handling adolescents are because the adults have over-spent their opinions or lost their credibility with the young person.

Children like to be accepted and respected by other children. There is a critical age from about three to six in which a lot of experience of other children of the same stage of development is important to children's learning appropriateness in their relationship with other children. Many children who have had such early setbacks and can't get on with children, are highly stressed at school. They can be rejected by other children because they are different. Often a child is given a 'bad name' because of some early behavioural difficulties. This is difficult for a child, because people continually give details of the bad things they expect them to do. This expectation then provides the model on which their future behaviour is built. Many of these children have learnt that the most intense form of attention comes when they do 'bad' things. So they keep doing them. Generally, children who know they 'belong' to a family that is okay (it doesn't need to be perfect) are protected from a lot of stressful things that can happen.

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