

STRESSED KIDS

The need to let kids be kids was cited often by Mt. Lebanon area professionals, who are concerned that, in many cases, kids are being asked to take on responsibility not only for themselves, but for their parents.

By Judith Donohue

Michael, a 10 year-old Little Leaguer who delivers newspapers and collects matchbox cars, carries Maalox in his lunchbox to alleviate the pains from the ulcer he has developed.

Chris, 16, an honor student, hospital candy striper and "all around good kid," has recently been complaining of headaches. Although she has been sleeping nine or ten hours each day, she complains that she is too tired to go to school.

Michael and Chris (pseudonyms) have recently been diagnosed as "stressed children," youngsters who suffer from a syndrome previously assumed to have been an adult problem. Faced with disintegrating families, increased academic pressures and the omnipresence of drugs and alcohol, many young people today are carrying burdens their parents never experienced.

Child psychologist David Elkind describes the children of the 80's as "hurried children, forced to achieve more, earlier than any other generation; outfitted in designer jeans and a whole array of adult costumes; faced with divorce and single parent families, their rites of passage come too early."

Mt. Lebanon area educators and counselors agree that there has been an increase in the number of young people and their families seeking help in dealing with the pressures of the 80's.

"We are definitely seeing more kids — especially young teens — than we have ever seen in the past, says Judy Carter, a psychiatrist from Upper St. Clair who counsels several young people from Mt. Lebanon. "There is a great deal of pressure to achieve in these South Hills communities. An average I.Q. is not enough here. Young people have high expectations of themselves," she says.

Counselors say they frequently meet with teens and pre-teens who are worried about not measuring up.

"In past generations, young people were motivated by the desire to achieve more than their parents. Most of them were able to do that," says Nancy Perlman, of Outreach South, a community-based counseling center. "Today, they are lucky if they can even match their parents in terms of education and lifestyle."

"The pressure of getting into college and getting a job is tremendous," adds Outreach Executive Director Judy Morton Fleming. "Some kids feel defeated before they even begin."

Students' fears about their future have a basis in fact. "The job outlook for college students appears bleak for the rest of the decade," says Russell Rumberger, a Stanford University researcher who studies employment prospects.

"For the first time in American history, students face the specter of downward mobility, the probability that

they will be worse off financially than their parents who graduated in the 50's and 60's," he says.

The fear of downward mobility is not limited to kids, according to Rev. David Isch, executive director of South Hills Interfaith Ministry, a human resources organization supported by area churches and synagogues. "Stress is running high in the nation today, mainly because of economic pressures. Many families in this area are suffering economic stress for the first time. Unemployment — or fear of unemployment — can be crippling to a family. Unfortunately, in time of financial crisis, families are least likely to come for help," he says. (All South Hills social service agencies base fees on income and ability to pay, so those with limited resources should not hesitate to seek help.)

The stress manifests itself in many ways, according to Isch. Drug and alcohol abuse, spouse and child beating, breakdowns in parent-child relationships are all related, he says.

Lois Greenberg, director of outpatient care at Parent and Child Guidance Center on Mt. Lebanon Boulevard, sees the same trend. "Young people today are under much more stress than their parents were. Not only are we seeing more pre-adolescent (junior high age) kids, we are also seeing more four and five year-olds. I'm not sure if that's because kids are experiencing stress at a younger age, or if it's because parents are more aware of the problem."

Recognizing a child under stress is not always easy, especially if the child is not a strong communicator. "It's the quiet kids, the good kids, that get here last," says Carter. "But when parents look back, they will usually see that the signs were there: changes in eating and sleeping habits, moodiness, changes in relationships with peers, trouble at school."

"Most of our referrals arise out of problems at school," says Greenberg, admitting that it is sometimes difficult to determine cause and effect when analyzing sources of stress.

"We are definitely referring more elementary age youngsters to mental health professionals than we have in the past," says Dale Boyer, principal at Markham Elementary.

"School is the child's workplace," says Shirley Davidson, principal of Hoover Elementary School. "Just as their parents' stress will manifest itself on the job, so the student's stress will show up in school. Today's students don't have outlets for relieving stress that we did," she adds. "We could escape for a walk in the woods or kick a ball around with our friends. Today's kids don't play enough — I mean free play where kids, not adults, are in control."

Organized sports are a major contributor to childhood stress, says psychologist Elkind. "Generally, it is parent need, not a child's authentic wish, that pushes a child into team sports at an early age," he says. "Often

A 1935 study at New York City Teachers College showed that the most frequent childhood fears were:

- animals
- dark rooms
- strange persons
- loud sounds
- loneliness

A recent study at Jewish Community Services in Queens, N.Y., showed children have different worries today:

- death of a parent
- parents suffering from cancer
- divorce
- nuclear war
- poor grades

— from USA Today

ABOUT OUR PEOPLE



Lee Cepits, CTC

Lee Cepits, manager of our travel agency, has just completed 2½ years of advanced study, earned a Certified Travel Counselor certificate, and hereafter may write the initials CTC after her name.

The course involved innumerable meetings with eight other travel agents of managerial stature, studying business and professional material prepared by the prestigious Institute of Certified Travel Agents, then going to San Diego for a seminar evaluation. She had coordinated the course locally.

I mention that as an indication of the professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm of our staff. All are South Hills residents, but together they have covered about all of the world that can be traveled.

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Peg, incidentally, is still not able to resume her work in the agency. I have a desk in the office, where I do my Press columns and am available for consultation.

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Marie Winn, author of "Children Without Childhood," says, "If kids do not have a life protected from adult problems and are forced to focus their attention on adult affairs, they can't concentrate on things like history, geography and algebra. Kids have to look out for themselves. Kids thrust into adult roles are being cheated of a carefree period of life they need."

"Kids have to know that if Mom and Dad are having a problem, it's not their problem. It's their parents' problem," adds Outreach's Fleming.

One of the most tragic manifestations of stress is the escalation of teen suicide. Currently the third leading cause of teen death — after accidents and homicides — suicide claims 5,000 young lives each year. And it is estimated that for every suicide completed, between 50 and 200 are attempted.

"I see parents who are getting better at recognizing signs of stress and who are more apt to get help when it is needed."

Chicago child psychiatrist Harold Visotsky says that in affluent communities, pressure to achieve at an early age, can contribute to teen depression and suicide.

"With well-to-do kids, the rattle goes in the mouth and the foot goes on the social ladder. The competition ethic takes over, making a child feel even more alone. He is more likely to take it out on himself than on society."

College counseling centers throughout the nation report dramatic increases in "suicide ideation," students talking about taking their own lives. In response to the cries for help, many colleges are beefing up their mental health programs, using both professionals and trained peer counselors.

Mt. Lebanon High School is going in the other direction, according to Joseph Price, assistant principal in charge of guidance. "Due to economic conditions and declining enrollments, we have had to eliminate two guidance positions this year," he says. "However, we are working closely with outside agencies like Outreach, Parent-Child Guidance Center and the drug and alcohol Network program, and plan to utilize their resources whenever possible. Price says he hopes that Mt. Lebanon students who were recently trained by the Network program as peer counselors will provide support for their classmates in the coming year.

MLHS senior Suzanne Koesel, a member of the Outreach South board and a trained peer counselor, hopes to be able to help kids cope with stress. "We are just beginning to recognize and deal with stress at the high school. Probably the most stressed kids are

those entering ninth grade, especially those who do not have a circle of friends to support them," she says. "We older students really have to do more to welcome freshmen into the school, to accept them into our groups. It seems funny, but the freaks, the kids who hang around the smoking areas, are much more accepting than the mainstream kids."

The pressure of group membership can be stressful for adolescents, according to Outreach counselor Jay Carson. "The groups are clearly defined, as are the behaviors within the groups: the preps, the jocks, the heads, the straights."

"Young people are facing pressures their parents never thought about at their age: whether or not to have sex; whether to drink or take drugs," he adds.

Although counselors agree that it's tougher than ever to get to adulthood intact, they see many hopeful signs.

"I have seen a change in parental attitudes in the last few years," says Outreach's Stephen Hesky. "Parents seem more concerned about parenting. For a generation, we experimented with ideas like 'Parents should be friends.' The boundaries broke down and roles became fuzzy. The notion that parents should be friends drives kids crazy! They don't want more friends. They want parents."

"I see parents who are heavily invested in their kids," says psychiatrist Carter. "Parents who are getting better at recognizing signs of stress and who are more apt to get help when it is needed."

And there is help available in the Mt. Lebanon area, (see sidebar) not only for those in crisis, but also for those families determined to prevent or minimize problems related to stress.

Joan Lanz, a former classroom teacher and mother of four daughters, directs the prevention efforts of the Parent and Child Guidance Center. She conducts classes, speaks to groups and plans programs designed to ease the burdens of parenting. "We try to offer ways to deal creatively with stress. We recognize that so many parents — especially single parents and mothers in two-career families — are tired, and that they may need some tips for making life easier," she says. Many of the center's prevention programs focus on the developing pre-school children, Lanz says.

Continued next page.

"If we can address the problem of stress early in the developmental process, perhaps we can avoid problems later and make life a little easier for families in our communities."

"Please don't use the Yellow Pages."

It helps to share worries with someone you trust and respect. This may be a friend, family member, clergyman, teacher, or counselor. Sometimes another person can help you see a new side to your problem, and thus, a new solution. If you find yourself becoming preoccupied with emotional problems it might be wise to seek a professional listener, like a guidance counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. (Ask someone you trust for suggestions — perhaps a pediatrician, a teacher, a clergy member, a friend who has had a problem.) This is not admitting defeat. It is admitting you are an intelligent person who knows when to ask for help.

• **Parent and Child Guidance Center** — 300 Mt. Lebanon Boulevard, 343-7166.

Offers group and individual counseling for parents and children of all ages. Funded through the county department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. Offers a wide range of programs and services, including an extensive prevention program for parents of young children. Fees range from \$2 per month to \$50 per visit, depending on income and ability to pay.

• **South Hills Interfaith Ministry (SHIM)** Park Avenue School, Bethel Park, 833-6177.

Operates 35 different programs, including a popular self-awareness course. Offers both group and individual counseling. Funded by contributions from area congregations and by donations from individuals, civic groups and businesses. Fees are modest, on a sliding scale, according to annual income.

• **Outreach South, Inc.**, 91 Central Square, Mt. Lebanon, 561-5405

Geared mainly to teens, the program is the only one in the area that reports a high number of self-referrals. Based on changing needs of the community, the organization has recently shifted its focus from crisis to prevention and from individual to family counseling. Supported by donations from South Hills communities. Mt. Lebanon kids are free. Other family members pay according to income, on a sliding scale, to a maximum of \$21 per visit.

• **Private Psychologists and Psychiatrists**, ask for recommendation from trusted friend or clergyman.

There are several child psychiatrists in the South Hills area, most of whom charge about \$60 per hour for therapy.



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