

Autonomy versus Guidance: Finding Balance between Control and Stress in the Journey of Adolescent Brain Development

If you have confidence you can impact a situation, it will be less stressful. In contrast, a low sense of control may very well be the most stressful human experience. Agency (perceived control) may be one of the most important factors in human happiness and well-being. It is stressful to feel powerless and children feel that way all the time.

STRESS

The National Scientific Council on The Developing Child has identified three kinds of stress:

- 1) **Positive stress** motivates children (and adults) to grow, take risks, and perform at a high level
- 2) **Tolerable stress**, which occurs for relatively brief periods, and can also build resilience
- 3) **Toxic stress**, which is frequent or prolonged activation of the stress system in the absence of support

ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

In moments of great self-doubt, understanding the brain will help children grasp that much of their behavior is chemical not character

- 1) The executive control system
- 2) The stress response system
- 3) The motivational system

Normal adolescents, even those that are not experiencing any particular stressor, have exaggerated stress responses.

Animal studies have shown that after prolonged periods of stress, the adult brain tends to bounce back within ten days, while the adolescent brain takes about three weeks as they have less stress *tolerance* than adults. Even after they have recovered, they are more likely to have mild but persistent symptoms like pessimism or sleep or appetite issues that will make them more vulnerable to depression later in life.

CONTROL

We have a tendency in our society to think that “with enough hard work, anything is possible”. “If you didn’t make it”, the dangerous corollary goes, “ you must not have worked hard enough”.

Parents and teachers as consultants, not enforcers: Giving children more needed control over their lives meaning giving up some of our own

Spending 95 units of energy trying to help a child be successful means they will spend 5 units of energy.

- We can't make children do something against their will
- We can't make children want something they don't want
- We can't make kids not want what they want
- It is ok, at least for right now, for them to want what they want and not want what they don't want

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN AND THE CONSULTANT MODEL

"Is there anything I can help you with tonight? I'd like to know so I can plan my evening"

People go the extra mile when it matters to them not when it matters to you

Practice asking, "Who is responsible for this? "Whose problem is it?"

Once properly informed, kids usually do make good decisions for themselves, and their decisions are almost always as good as or better than our own

The more experience kids have on managing their own stress and overcoming their own challenges, the more their prefrontal cortex will be able to regulate their amygdala

INNER DRIVE

Fixed mindset- mistakes come from a lack of ability and are powerlessness to change

Growth mindset- focus on effort as a means to become more successful

Competence = feeling one can handle a situation versus being very good at something

Incentives: external incentives versus intrinsic motivation and when to incentivize