

Back to school means stress for some, experts warn

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Are students today under more pressure than previous generations? Psychologists at local hospitals say they see a surge of young patients at the end of September and early October.

It's a time when kids realize that they are not able to cope with the challenges of the year ahead — whether they can't keep up with school work, didn't make the sports team, or face anxiety around social issues, says Dr. Jessica Cooperman, child and adolescent psychiatrist at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Dr. David Ng, psychiatrist at Markham Stouffville, believes it is tougher these days.

"Families are busier and can't afford to spend as much time with their kids, despite wanting to."

During the high school years, year-end cumulative or summative assignments take their toll; the academic load is compounded by the loss of Grade 13, Ng says.

"I don't think the students are totally prepared. All along they seem to be able to manage, but suddenly by Grade 12, they can't."

Ng used to see students in crisis during their first year in post-secondary school, but now troubles surface at the high school level.

"They come into emergency and we ask, 'why do you want to kill yourself?' and they say, 'I'm dead because there are several projects that are due and there's no way I can finish in a couple of weeks.'"

Often, it's the first real hurdle youth have faced in life.

"This generation has it easy... We may not try to spoil them, but they do have a lot of creature comforts — that's why it's so hard."

A summer job is no longer a given and kids may find it difficult to put effort into things they don't want to do — fundamentals such as reading, writing and math.

Parents may not be aware their kids are at their limit.

"When they show up in emergency, many parents are blindsided... They're in complete shock. Even that morning, coming to emergency, they say 'they seemed so normal!'"

There are signs to watch for:



Mike Barrett/Metroland

Dr. David Ng, child and adolescent psychiatrist at Markham Stouffville Hospital, says his hospital sees a surge of young patients at end of September when students realize they are not able to cope with challenges of school.

- Changes in social and activity levels and an inability to fall asleep;
- Teens may be grumpy sometimes, but it's a warning sign if they are consistently irritable;
- Playing more video games than normal may be a sign they're trying to avoid stress, or thinking it helps them cope;
- Missing school — sometimes parents don't know because they are away at work and when the school calls home, kids erase the voice mail;
- Physical symptoms — they look sick, complain of constant stomach aches or headaches.

None of these signs on their own mean trouble, but they are a signal to explore further, discuss concerns with a trusted adult, coach or teacher who knows your child.

And remember, a child who voices a parents' worst fear, saying 'I want to kill myself', doesn't necessarily want to kill himself, Ng says.

"He is saying 'I'm stuck and need help' and at that point, definitely professional help is important."

GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP?

One of the key areas to address, before the first day in the classroom, is sleep — or lack thereof.

Studies show children need 10 hours of sleep a night — even through the teen years — but Ng says 90 per cent of youth do not get it, and that's not good.

If you miss two hours of sleep, you lose one IQ point, Ng says, and if you miss two hours of

sleep per night on five consecutive days, you lose 50 IQ points.

"You may be a genius, but you're less than average by the end of the week if you're not getting enough sleep."

He suggests that during the weeks before school starts, families gradually dial back bedtime until kids are hitting the sack at a more school-friendly time.

They may still play video games, but they'll need to unplug earlier. One hour before bedtime is advisable, Ng says, because studies show the "blue light" from games stops the release of the sleep-inducing chemical melatonin. Use that pre-sleep quiet time for casual chats with your children. It can be an opportunity to share feelings and secrets, something kids grow to love.

PREVENT STUDENT STRESS

Backpack? Check. Laptop? Check. Pens, binders and agenda? Check, check, check.

Mental health? Did you check that one off, too?

Dr. David Ng hopes so.

If you forget that important item in your back-to-school checklist, the child and adolescent psychiatrist warns your child could be one of a growing number of students who turn up in hospital emergency rooms and doctors' offices later this fall.

Ng, a specialist at Markham Stouffville Hospital, says the days leading up to Labour Day are a good time to mentally prepare your child for the transition ahead.

In the same way athletes and coaches come up with a game plan for the coming season, parents and kids can sit down together during these pre-classroom days for some school strategizing.

It doesn't need to be a long, formal meeting, but take some time to chat about what's ahead, Ng suggests, reflect on what kids did right last year, what could be improved, and what would be helpful. A communication board on the fridge? Tutoring? Fun things to do at the end of the day?

After hearing kids' ideas, parents can contribute theirs. Then call it a day. Another meeting, later, could talk about other important issues such as sleep schedules or after-school routines.

Now is also the time to start the "family huddle" — a regular time to reflect together. It can take just 10 minutes, but it's a chance to touch base and review how things are going.

When your kids can see improvements and build on past successes and problem-solving, it feeds their self-confidence.

At one of these family huddles, Ng suggests asking kids what ideas they have for school routines. When is a good time to do homework? Right after school may seem best, but kids may want to try something else. Don't be afraid to let them give it a shot, with a plan to re-evaluate every week or two. If it's not working, try something else (but never say "I told you so").

Ng tells of one student who said he wanted to sleep after school and get up after midnight to do homework. Parents initially balked and explained why it wasn't the best approach, but they gave it a two-week trial and in fact he did very well on that schedule for an entire semester. His marks jumped from the 60s to 90s, Ng says.

And finally, don't forget to set aside regular family time for fun — no matter how busy you are — at least once a month, Ng suggests.

— Kim Zarzour

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