

DocTalk

Don't sweat the small school stuff

Understanding one's children and guiding them can help minimise stress for parents and maximise their kids' academic potential



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Imagine you are on a sailing ship in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with just your spouse and the ship's crew.

There is a heavy storm and there is a chance the ship may sink. The crew prepares the lifeboat, which is big enough for all of you. You are faced with two choices:

- Hop onto the lifeboat and help others to do the same.
- Stay on the ship and complain that if you get on the lifeboat, it makes you look afraid. You think the ship may not sink. You blame the storm for spoiling your trip. You blame the crew for abandoning ship. You blame your spouse for suggesting this trip.

You create stress for yourself and others and risk losing your life by staying put.

Why do I put up such a simple analogy, you may ask.

This analogy describes the two choices available to anyone, whenever he faces a challenge in his life.

Parents are often presented with similar challenges when it comes to their children's well-being and academic studies. However, in attempting to decide on the best option for their children, they may end up causing their children stress.

Psychological stress refers to the discomfort resulting from one's sense of being unable to control something that matters to him.

Excessive stress is harmful to us, emotionally and physically. It can result in physical symptoms such as breathlessness, abdominal pain, poor appetite and headaches.

Stress can also increase our chances of developing burnout, stroke and depression.

The degree of stress that we each experience is based mostly on three factors:

- recognising what can be controlled;
- being willing to give up on what cannot and should not be controlled; and
- being willing to do something about the things we should control.

These three factors also, happily, dictate our chances of getting the outcome that matters to us.

In other words, if we accept and directly tackle all the three factors,



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we minimise our stress and maximise our chances of getting the results we want.

Recognising what we can control tells us where we can channel our limited time and energy.

Giving up on what we cannot and should not control basically tells us not to pay attention to unnecessary distractions, such as the opinions of others.

When we pay attention to these two factors, we are cementing our sense of control – which is essential to lowering stress.

The final step, which is to do something about what should be controlled, is easier when we recognise that we have many uncontrollable distractions. All three factors are closely intertwined.

What is worrisome in the modern digital age is that we become increasingly tempted to blame everyone and everything else for our situation.

In Singapore, we have high academic standards and it is common for parents to hire tutors

for their children in the hope of improving their grades.

As a result, many children, as well as their parents, suffer unnecessary stress. The stress leads some parents to beat their children and some children may suffer from depression as a result of the stress.

Many are tempted to blame Singapore's high standards as the source of their stress, but this is just a convenient excuse.

Let us consider a common case of a weary parent worrying constantly about his child's school performance.

First, a parent cannot control the child's performance, but he can address the child's willingness to study and his level of awareness of the importance of his school results.

What the parent can do is sit down with the child, explore his attitudes towards the examination and future and listen carefully to what he is doing and why. This requires patience and effort.

Parents should also review their child's homework on a regular basis, rather than make a shotgun-style

“review everything I can” attempt.

However, they may say they have more important things to do with their time than sit down with their child. Or they may nag at him to study, expect him to do well in school, then punish him if he does badly.

We can't control our children. But if we understand them and know how to guide and help them, this may prove far more effective than tuition lessons, scolding, artificial rewards and making excuses for ourselves.

We can't control whether they will ace their exams. But we are in control of whether we truly did our best to help them do that.

These distinctions are crucial if we want to minimise stress for ourselves and our children and maximise their academic success.

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