

THE STRESS MANAGER...

POOR HEALTH AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In my last column, I suggested that the epidemic of learning disorders we are seeing in children is due not to some mysterious learning problem, but is instead the early sign of health issues. These early indicators presage multiple chronic health issues later in a life that could be shorter than the present life expectancy.

Children are being deluged with the effects of social changes in the environment and culture that are recent developments in human history, only occurring during the last few decades. These changes include the advent of fast and processed foods, food additives, technology, vastly increased pollution (electromagnetic, light, sound, and toxins), greatly increased stress in the culture as a whole, and changes that have affected the bonding between mother and child during the critical two years following birth.

My humble opinion gains some support from a study that was recently reported by the University of Minnesota. The basic conclusion was that health affected academic performance. UM interviewed over 9,000 students. Seventy percent of the students reported that they felt stressed. This corresponds with the result of an MTV study I previously cited in this column, which quoted college students as saying that stress is their number one problem. There is no doubt that stress suppresses the immune system and is an important challenge to health.

UM's study reported that a third of the students who reported stress felt that stress was affecting their academic performance. In fact, those students had a lower mean grade point average than the other students interviewed.

Among the other factors that the study identified as health concerns were excessive television and computer use over and above that required by study requirements. Even among adults, we know the power of television and the internet to addict. Addiction is a health issue, and it affects performance.

Research strongly suggests that prefrontal lobe development has been interrupted among young people by cultural forces. The prefrontal lobes are those structures in the brain that function to control impulsive behavior, and we know that they may fail to develop fully in the absence of the conditions that foster development. The primary condition for development is a sense of being loved and feeling connected in the world. It is the very opposite emotion – a desire for connection unfulfilled – which feeds addiction to technology.

Disrupted sleep was another factor cited by UM as affecting health and grades. Stress and technology addiction affect sleep patterns. Other factors cited were gambling, alcohol and tobacco use – all obvious challenges to health.

So it's not a big leap to see that young children are also suffering from a diminished ability to perform – however labeled – due to health challenges. Young children are also routinely overexposed to television and computers. Young children are suffering from stress in high numbers. Many young children are not getting enough sleep.

Perhaps my suggestion that learning disorders is a health issue may seem a small point. I don't think so. It appears to me that we have not fully explored what seems obvious.

What's obvious? High levels of stress, poor diets, increasing environmental pollution, technology

addictions – all these have health implications. Why not give greater attention to the possibility that young children with learning disorders need to have attention paid to their relationship with technology, pollution, diet and stress?

Its pretty clear that stress can affect eyesight, as can too much attention given to two dimensional surfaces, such as cell phones, computers, and televisions.

Ears can detune, even without hearing loss, due to stress, sound pollution and ear infections.

Poor diets can severely affect the ability of the immune system to ward off the effects of infections and stress. Compromised digestive processes are a precursor to chronic and ultimately acute disease.

Parental stress translates directly to stress for children.

For young children, all of these challenges are magnified because the child's developing neural systems are in the very process of adapting to environmental influences.

My point is simple, and I'll say it in another way.

When we look at children who are struggling academically, let us understand that we need to look not only at the child, but at the environment to which the child is struggling to adapt. All children are struggling with these novel human challenges, and we need to understand that the reason why they have trouble reading or paying attention isn't all in their heads.

In fact, it is neither a physical health problem, or a mental health problem. Breaking human performance issues down into these two categories does not help us address the underlying causes, which are almost always – trauma and some infections apart – a combination of underlying genetic vulnerabilities and physical responses to foods, toxins, allergens and stressful life circumstances.

Understanding the foundations of good health is the single most important thing we can do in order to better understand why academic performance is lagging below potential.

Next column: Defining good health.