



Building Bridges: Linking Practice and Research on Home Visitation



Effects of Stress on the Family

By Darcy Richardson, BA

Stress: every one of us has felt it. Jobs, finances, relationships, parenting, health concerns; just mentioning these words may make your heart pound and your breathing increase. Changes in heart rate and breathing are common physical symptoms experienced when under stress. These and other symptoms occur when the body releases adrenaline, a hormone that prepares the body to react to a situation quickly. This adrenaline response can be helpful in a short-term crisis, but as an ongoing response to stress, it can have negative effects on your body and health. Stress can create head, neck, jaw, and back aches, and problems with sleeping. It can also contribute to bad habits like smoking, drinking, overeating, or drug abuse.

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*Family Stress
Management
Part 1*



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Physical/Emotional Responses to Stress:

- Headache
- Backache
- Neck ache
- Stomach ache
- Tight muscles
- Clenched jaw
- Feeling tired without good reason
- Trouble sleeping
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Depression
- Helplessness
- Loss of control
- Tension
- Irritation
- Impatience
- Forgetfulness



(from *the American Heart Association website (www.americanheart.org)*).

Stress can come from specific events in a person's life. Some of the most stressful events in the lives' of couples and families are death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, jail term, and personal injury or loss (see page 8 for an extended list).

Stress, however, is often related to multiple events or situations that are simultaneously occurring. For example, concern over increased gas prices, in conjunction with an elderly parent requiring in-home care and the academic problems of a child, may combine to create the feelings of stress, whereas alone, each of these concerns might feel more manageable. A study by Peterson and Hawley (1998) found that three significant

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From the Editor:

Stress—it seems like an inescapable part of modern life. There is almost always too much to do, in too little time, with insufficient resources. Even the most functional individuals and families struggle to find a balance between work and play, relaxation and family time, household chores and progress toward long-term goals. Trying to juggle all of these parts of life is stressful alone. Add to these ongoing stressors a life-changing event, such as the loss of a family member, a job change, or an economic downturn, and the stress can begin to feel overwhelming.

For families that do not have strong coping abilities or access to resources, such as connections to a community or a few good friends there for support, stress can build into a major crisis. Anything that we can do to reduce the stress our families experience is likely to have a direct influence on their quality of life. Parenting abilities, overall family functioning, and even health concerns, may be improved with the reduction of stress. Hopefully, this two part series on Family Stress Management will provide useful information about the causes of family stress, as well as suggestions for helping families prepare for, cope with, and manage the stresses they will inevitably face as they go about their lives.

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stressors (events, changes, problems, etc.) are typically the level at which the stress begins to impact family functioning and parenting attitudes.

Thus, there are certain periods in the life span of a family where stress typically increases or decreases due to the types of challenges that family is facing. The graph shows how work/family strains, financial and business strains, intrafamily strains, and losses typically fluctuate over a life-time (Yoav Lavee & McCubbin, 1987).

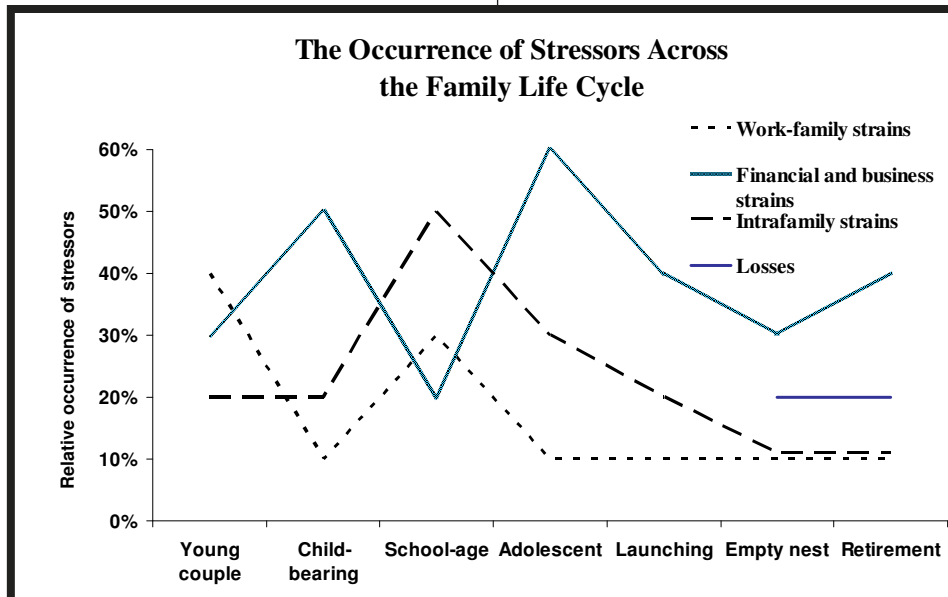
Strains between family and work tend to decrease over time, though they increase during the time when children are of school-age. Financial and business strains vary during a lifetime, with significant increases typically around child-bearing, during the time adolescents are leaving the home, and, to some degree, again in retirement. Strains within the family are often particularly high during the time children are of school age and in adolescence. Losses tend to increase after the children have left the home and the family enters retirement.

Research has also shown that the overall amount of stress a family feels typically corresponds inversely to their level of satisfaction. In other words, when a family experiences high levels of stress, they are generally found to also have lower levels of satisfaction with their family life.

In addition to family satisfaction, high stress levels have been shown to impact the interactions between youth and their parents. One study completed by Michigan State University

for the United States Department of Health and Human Services (McKelvey, 2002), found that women with lower levels of stress were more sensitive to infant cues, more responsive to infant distress signals, and better able to foster the social-emotional growth of their child. This study was done with women of lower socio-economic status, but other research has shown similar findings

among wealthier families. Basically, as levels of stress are higher, parenting behaviors tend to be weaker.



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Family Stress Models

By Darcy Richardson, BA

One way of understanding family stress is through conceptual models. Family stress models can be used to help predict how different families will respond to stress and can help home visitors work with families to cope with stressful events that arise. In 1958, a researcher named R. Hill proposed the first family stress model, and it is still used as the basic framework by most sociological researchers studying stress today. This model basically says that a stressful event (A) combines with the families' response to the event, including their use of crisis meeting resources (B) and definition of that event (C), to result in the crisis (X). The table below shows how these different factors are defined and offers an example of each:

A	INTERACTING WITH	B	AND INTERACTING WITH	C	PRODUCES	X
A Stressor Event		The Families' Crisis Meeting Resources		The Definition the Family Makes of the Event		The CRISIS
<i>A life event or transition that produces, or has the potential to produce, change in the family social system.</i>		<i>The family's ability to prevent an event or change in the family social system from creating a crisis.</i>		<i>The family's perception of the stressor and its hardships and how they are affected by them.</i>		<i>A continuous variable denoting the disruptiveness, disorganization, or incapacity in the family system.</i>
<p><u>For Example</u></p> <p>Death of a grandparent</p>		<p><u>For Example</u></p> <p>Strong family communication and bonding; involvement in a community</p>		<p><u>For Example</u></p> <p>“This is a devastating loss, and I don’t know if we will make it through”</p> <p>“And so many things have to get done for the funeral”</p>		<p><u>For Example</u></p> <p>Initially, it is a very hard time, but family and friends offer support and help with arrangements while the family mourns and gradually begins to accept that their lives will continue</p>

(Adapted from Krauss, 1988)

So what is this model actually saying? Let’s take the example highlighted above: a family experiences the loss of a grandparent, a life event with potential to change the family system (A). This family has strong communication and bonding and a community of close friends who support each other. In this example, these factors are the resources the family has available (B). The family, however, is looking at this event and wondering if they will make it through and if they can get everything they need done at the same time. These views are how the family perceives the event and the hardships it will cause (C). The crisis is how these factors interact (X). In this example, the family struggles at first because they are effected a great deal by the event and don’t know if they will make it through, but they have enough support, within the family and from friends, that the crisis gradually begins to lessen without overwhelming them entirely.

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Coping Techniques and Tips for Stress Management

By Darcy Richardson, BA

Home visitors can help families strengthen their coping abilities so they are better prepared to handle stresses and crises that arise. They can also help families learn techniques to decrease their stress levels, minimizing the impact it has on their lives.

There are two common types of coping techniques people use to handle stress: avoidant and active. Avoidant strategies suggest that the person remove him or herself from the source of stress. For many situations, this is simply not a feasible option. Active strategies are the other alternative. Active coping techniques suggest that the person handle the stressful situation by

changing the way the stress affects him/ her cognitively or behaviorally (McKelvey, 2002). The table lists some of the types of active coping strategies that can be used to handle stress (Ashford, LeCroy, & Lortie 2006).

Changing what you know about a situation or your perceptions or feelings toward it, building relationships or accessing community support, or growing in your understanding of your own strengths and hopes, these can all help prepare you to actively cope with stress. Individuals working with families can help address all these areas.

In addition to learning coping strategies, there are some ways to more effectively handle those moments where you feel stressed. The following are some stress management tips (adapted from the American Heart Association website):

Positive self talk

Negative self talk increases stress levels, so practice speaking positively to yourself. For example, try positive statements such as these:

- “I will do the best I can”
- “I can handle things one step at a time”
- “I won’t let this problem worry me”
- “I will laugh about this some day”

Do things you enjoy

Doing things that you enjoy helps reduce your levels of stress. Even simple things such as art projects, reading, having a meal with friends, going bowling, taking a walk, listening to music, watching a movie, playing cards, or sewing can help reduce stress.

Relaxing

Just sitting and doing nothing or watching television does not necessarily mean you are relaxed. Real relaxation can take practice. Deep breathing is a form of relaxation that anyone can do. Follow these steps for a deep breathing exercise:

- 1) sit comfortably
- 2) picture yourself somewhere peaceful (clouds, beach, etc.)
- 3) inhale and exhale slowly and deeply
(some doctors recommend that you inhale through your nose for four counts, hold your breath for seven counts, and breath out through your mouth for a count of eight)
- 4) This technique can help to reduce stress in just a few breaths, but continue to breath slowly in this way for 10 minutes for the greatest relaxation.

Type of Active Coping Strategy	Coping Technique
Cognitive	Gain knowledge about the situation
	Reframe the situation
Emotional	Express feelings
	Resolve negative feelings
Relationships	Increase cohesion--how well you function together
	Increase adaptability--how well you handle changes
	Increase trust and cooperation
Community	Seek help and trust
Spiritual	Be involved in religious activities
	Maintain faith and hope
Individual Development	Develop autonomy and independence

Exercise regularly.

Exercise increases chemicals in your body that make you feel good, and the activity can help you use your nervous energy productively.

Avoid stressful situations

Try to avoid situations that you know will be stressful or prepare yourself beforehand with relaxation exercises.

Don't over-extend.

Learn to say no sometimes and cut-back on activities that you don't have to do and/or don't enjoy.

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Try to accept things that you cannot change

Putting energy into events or situations that cannot be changed will only wear you out without offering any real benefit or result.

Don't try to solve your problems with alcohol, food, or drugs.

These types of behaviors may feel like solutions, but are likely to actually increase your stress levels in the long-term.

And the following tips may be particularly useful for families (adapted from Work and Family Stress Busters, 2000):

1) Take care of the little things before they become a big deal

For many families, it is the accumulation of small worries that start to build up. Don't wait to send in the bills, to resolve the dispute over bed-times, or to bring up a concern you have with your boss. These small concerns can become big problems during times when you are unprepared to handle them.

2) Keep it in perspective

No matter how worried you are about potty-training your child, or that he/she forgot her homework, or that a vase was broken in the living room, try to step back and see the big picture. *He/she probably didn't do it on purpose. That vase was not that special to me.* So really, how important is that thing that you are stressing over? Prioritize where you place your energy and concern.

3) Share your feelings

Your children can likely tell when something is worrying you, so go ahead and tell them about it. Obviously don't burden them with extensive knowledge of financial problems, of relationships worries, etc...but it is ok for them to know you have some things on your mind right now. And apologize if your stress gets to you and you yell at them without good reason. They will feel better knowing it is not their fault and so will you. Use the counting and breathing technique (described above under Relaxation) when you feel frustration levels start to rise. This exercise will help you keep your composure when communicating with your children.

4) Ask for help

While taking care of a family can put tremendous stress on parents, a family is also a group of people there to help each other. So request that the older kids help you do

developmentally appropriate household tasks, or that your spouse take the kids to the park for a little while, to give you some quiet time after a stressful day. Maybe your neighbor would love to have the kids for dinner tonight? People are often glad for the opportunity to help each other.

5) Prioritize

Some days, most days even, it may feel like there is an unending list of things you have to get done and want to get done. Prioritizing the tasks and activities that are of the greatest importance to you and your family can help you fit more in your day. Think of your day as a jar and the things to do as rocks of different sizes. If you want to be able to get the most rocks you can in that jar, you have to put the big rocks in first and pour in the pebbles and grains of sand around them. The same is true of your time. Think about what is most important and make sure you set aside time in your day for those tasks and activities (Covey, 1989).

6) Use effective parenting skills

Parenting can be a stressful job, but the way you teach, relate to, and interact with your children can make a difference. In his book, *Parenting that Works*, Edward Christopherson (2003) outlines some techniques for parents to cope with situations with their children. A situation might be a baby fussing for no reason, children fighting over a toy, a broken vase, or a child lying or disobeying. In any of these types of situations, Christopherson recommends a three stage process:



Stop hurtful thoughts. Hurtful thoughts are negative self-talk around a given situation, such as the following comments:

“I am a bad parent;”

“I hate it when they fight;”

“He is always lying to me. The teacher must think I never help him with his homework;” or

“She is always so irresponsible.”

These comments are a natural response to the behavior of children, but do not help the situation and tend to increase the stress levels of everyone involved.

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Challenge your hurtful thoughts with more helpful and less distressing thoughts. For example, challenge the hurtful thoughts listed above with helpful thoughts such as the following:

“I take good care of my children, just sometimes babies cry when nothing is wrong;”

“I don’t like it when they fight, but I know they will probably work it out amongst themselves in a few minutes. I fought with my siblings too;”

“He usually tells me the truth, so I wonder why this time he felt he had to lie;” or

“She usually follows the rules. I know I sometimes missed curfew as a teen, too.”

Once you have challenged the hurtful thoughts, the final step is to **Act** appropriately. For example, let the baby fuss until he falls asleep if you have tried everything you know to comfort him, send the children to their rooms to calm down, write a note to the teacher about missing homework, or take away a small privilege for breaking a rule that is usually followed.

These and other parenting skills can help parents and children handle situations that arise quickly in order to minimize the stress levels of everyone involved.



Even using these techniques, sometimes stress starts to build. The following are a few **Emergency Stress Stoppers** for those moments when you suddenly feel overwhelmed (American Heart Association):

- Count to 10 before you speak
- Take three to five deep breaths
- Walk away from the stressful situation and say you’ll come back to it later
- Go for a walk
- Break down big problems into smaller problems

If you are ever feeling more stressed than you can manage, resources are available in your community that can help. Contact 1-800-273-TALK (8255) if you have questions or are feeling overwhelmed. For questions related to parenting and child development, contact the Arizona-based, Birth to Five Helpline at 1-877-705-KIDS (5437).

Hopefully, these coping techniques and tips for stress management will help you minimize the stress in your life or to work with families who need your help to do the same. Life is stressful, but there are ways to minimize the impact of stress on family life. And your family life is well worth it. The next issue of *Building Bridges* will focus on particularly common family stresses, how to handle them and how to help families prepare and cope with them as they arise.

American Heart Association. (2007). *Reducing stress*. Retrieved Online March 4, 2008: www.americanheart.org.

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Christopherson, E.R.(2003). *Parenting that works*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Covey, S. (1989). *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Free Press.

McKelvey, L.M., Fitzgerald, H.E., Schiffman, R.F. and Von Eye, A. (2002). Family stress and parent-infant interaction: the mediating role of coping. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 23 (1-2), 164-181.

Work and family stress busters. (2000). *Family Life*, pg. 18, 1/4p. Available online Academic Search Premier.

Creative Perspectives

Another Day Breathing

Another day of work,
Another day making it,
Barely making it,
Barely making ends meet.

Another day with the baby sick,
Another day sick,
Barely healing,
Barely believing all will heal.

Another day with him,
Another day bearing him,
Barely thinking
Barely thinking it could end.

Another day of worry,
Another days’ night of worry,
Barely breathing,
Barely breathing in at all.

Another day trying,
Another day to simply try,
Barely cutting it,
Barely being cut the slack.

Another day of rats,
Another day of rats-a- racing,
Barely seeing,
Barely wanting all to see.

Another day dreaming,
Another day only dreaming,
Barely hoping,
Barely hoping there is more.

But another day making it,
Is another day you made it.

And taking care a day at a time,
A day at a time takes care of itself.

So tell yourself that you can do it,
For you can, if you tell yourself.

And ask for help when you need it,
For all you might need is a little help.

Then take a jog or talk with friends,
For a jog or a talk can help you take on a lot.

And share what you feel with family,
For family already shares in what you feel.

Then just breath in every moment,
And take a moment to simply breath.

Simply breath.

Simply breath.

Simply breath.

Another day to breath.

By Darcy Richardson

Stress can also have effects on young children or adolescents, as stress, particularly around financial concerns, has been shown to impact marital relationships and overall family functioning. Economic stresses can impact the way parents work together and the way they associate with their children. Research suggests this can increase the stress levels of the youth and affect how well adjusted they are in their own lives (Conger et. al, 1994).

In conclusion, all families experience stress over their life span. However, certain periods of life coincide with increased stressors that can challenge the coping abilities of any parent. High levels of stress can take a toll on a family, from impacting health and marital relationships to affecting parenting abilities. Thus, family stress is likely to have an impact on everyone in the home. The article on Coping Techniques and Tips for Family Stress Management offer some strategies to help minimize stress levels and the effects stress can have on the family.

Conger, R.D., Ge, X. Elder Jr., G.H. Lorenze, F.O. & Simons, R.L. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents. *Child Development*, 65. 541-561.

Holmes, T.H. & Rahe, R. (1967). The social readjustment scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Vol. 11, 213-218.

McKelvey, L.M., Fitzgerald, H.E., Schiffman, R.F. & Von Eye, A. (2002). Family stress and parent-infant interaction: the mediating role of coping. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 23 (1-2), 164-181.

Peterson, J. & Hawley, D. (1998). Effects of stressors on parenting attitudes and family functioning in a primary prevention program. *Family Relations*, 47 (3), 221-227.

Yoav Lavee, Hamilton I. & McCubbin, David H. (1987). The effect of stressful life events and transitions on family functioning and well-being. *Olson Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol.49, No. 4, pp.857-873.



Thus, this model suggests that there are three primary ways to impact how a stressor affects a family (Krauss, 1988):

- 1) The stressor events themselves can be minimized;
- 2) The family can find new resources within the family and in the community that can help them respond to the stressors that arise; and
- 3) Families can change the way they define or give meaning to the stressful situation.

In the example above, it is clearly not possible to minimize the stressor event. A stressor event, however, might be minimized if that stressor is “running out of money before all the bills are paid at the end of every month.” The home visitor could offer techniques for finance management, encourage job training to find a better paying position, or suggest community resources where clothes, food, etc. are available at a lower cost. These could effect the degree to which a stressor becomes a crisis.

Home visitors can also help to increase crisis-meeting resources; for example, they can help encourage the family to become more involved in the community, to strengthen family bonds and relationships, or to develop goals or beliefs that will help carry them through challenging times (McCubbin, McCubbin, and Thompson, 1988). Home visitors can also encourage families to take a certain perspective on stressful events, primarily helping them to recognize the resources and strengths they have available, while maintaining a hopeful outlook on the future.

This model is a simplified version of all the factors that can affect family stress. It does not account for how stresses and strains accumulate over time. It also does account for how the effects of physical or mental illnesses (such as depression) and domestic violence or abuse can impact a families’ response to a particular event. These are areas that require particular attention and care by the home visitor. What this model does suggest, is that all families go through stressful situations, and yet, all families are able to develop strengths and abilities to handle them better, to access the resources they need, and to change the way they respond (McCubbin, 1995). It is a hopeful model that shows home visitors can help.

Hill, R. (1958). Generic features of families under stress. *Social Caseworker*, 49, 139-150.

McCubbin, M.A. (1995). The typology model of adjustment and adaptation: a family stress model. *Guidance and Counseling* (Summer 1995, Vol. 10, Issue 4) Available online Academic Search Premier.

McCubbin, M.A., McCubbin, H.I. & Thompson, A. (1988). *Family problem solving communication index*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.

Krauss, M.W. (1988). Measures of stress and coping in families. In Weiss, H.B. and Jacobs, F.H. (Eds.) *Evaluating Family Programs* (pp.177-194). New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

IT'S A FACT!

Top 25 Life Stressors

The following list shows some of life's most stressful events, beginning with the most severe:

1. Death of a spouse
2. Divorce
3. Marital separation
4. Jail term
5. Death of close family member
6. Personal injury or illness
7. Marriage
8. Fired from job
9. Marital reconciliation
10. Retirement
11. Change in family member's health
12. Pregnancy
13. Sexual difficulties
14. Addition to family
15. Business readjustment
16. Change in financial status
17. Death of a close friend
18. Career change
19. Change in the number of marital arguments
20. Mortgage or loan over \$10,000
21. Foreclosure of mortgage or loan
22. Change in work responsibilities
23. Son or daughter leaving home
24. Trouble with in-laws
25. Starting or finishing school

Adapted from: Holmes, T. & Rahe, R. (1967). Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 2.

WHAT'S NEXT?

FAMILY STRESS MANAGEMENT PART 2

We want to hear from you!

This newsletter was designed with you in mind. If you have ideas for future newsletters, comments, or suggestions about what you have read here, please send them to Allyson Baehr at: allyson@lecroymilligan.com.

Thank you!

Building Bridges:

Linking Practice
and Research on
Home Visitation

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