Evaluation of Stress Resources in School-Age Children by Fifth and Sixth Grade Teachers

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Overview

Stress in moderate amounts is a perfectly normal part of life. However, an excessive amount of stress may lead to detrimental effects on both a person’s body and mind. Children are especially susceptible to these effects due to their inexperience and unfamiliarity on how to cope with stress. Something that would seem completely tolerable to an adult may be the biggest stressor in a child’s life. These stressors inevitably lead to the “stress hormone” called cortisol to rise. Because stress has been linked to negative changes in the body such as elevated body mass and elevated cortisol levels, it is important to explore ways to reduce stress in children. In this study, several questions must be investigated, including what types of stressors children ages 10-12 years-old experience, what methods of stress relief work in this age group, and what teachers and health care providers can do to assess and alleviate stress in children. A collection of existing data will also be examined to determine whether stress in children leads to higher cortisol levels and thus a higher BMI. By determining if this idea is true, further research can be conducted to find ways to reduce stress in children and thus help facilitate healthy weight loss. Since obesity is on a rise in the United States, it would be best to start healthy stress-relieving practices early in childhood to help reduce obesity and its associated complications, and thus create an overall healthier nation.

Methodology

The sample size will include approximately ten participants employed from Tanner High School, East Limestone High School, and Creekside Elementary School. Prospective participants will be recruited through email, provide consent to participate in the study, and provide demographic information. Participants will be asked to meet for approximately twenty minutes to discuss stress in children with the principal investigator (PI) in a private conference room at the school. They will be asked to describe stressors commonly found in children and ways they know how to deal with it through open-ended interview questions. A resource manual will be developed to include more ways to deal with stress that the participants may not know of in hopes that it can help improve how they handle their students’ stress. Participants will use these new methods for one month. Following one month, the PI will meet with the participants in a private conference room at the school for a second interview to provide feedback. Participants will then be given school supplies as incentives and thanked for their time.

Impact

Teachers and healthcare providers alike may benefit from this study because it will provide ways to help children deal with stress in a healthy manner. Stress is known to have physical effects on a person’s mind and body, therefore by decreasing stress in children this study may help children maintain their health. The education provided through this study will benefit both children and those who take care of children by providing effective ways to manage stress. Further research is needed to determine whether cortisol levels are associated with a person’s weight and to what extent. As of now, children are not screened regularly for stress. Perhaps an assessment tool is needed for children that will allow us to further investigate the consequences of that stress, such as high cortisol levels that may impact weight loss or gain. For now, we may be able to educate our children on how to lower stress and increase exercise to get them to a healthier weight and possibly a more regular cortisol level. If there was a definite relationship between cortisol and weight gain, schools could start focusing on stress management more than just exercise to help children lose weight. While exercise and healthy eating help lower BMI, it may not be enough when high levels of stress impact the body so heavily.

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