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Heather L. Gulchowski

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Benefits of a Preventative Stress Management Program for Elementary Aged Students

Heather L. Gluchowski

EDCI 589 Applied Research

University of Mary Washington

Summer 2013

“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.”

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## **Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Intervention programs aimed to reduce stress and anxiety are often reserved for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, however, such programs should be made available to elementary level students in the general education setting. In order to better reach the general student body, such programs should be preventative in nature and available to all students as part of their academic curriculum. Oftentimes, students experience heightened school-related anxiety that can impact academic performance, socialization, daily living skills, and cause behavioral problems. In addition, excessive levels of stress can cause unexplained stomachaches and headaches, or more severely, drug or alcohol abuse (Fallin, 2012). Such symptoms can cause irrefutable harm to the overall academic and personal welfare of students. Daily stressors that can negatively impact students include test anxiety, parental and educator pressure, as well as social pressure to fit in (Fallin, Wallinga & Coleman, 2001; Romano, 1997; Salend, 2012). Preventative stress management programs beginning in elementary school can proactively teach students how to recognize and manage daily school stressors in healthy and positive ways, and set them up for effective management of future stress. Consequently, if general education students are not exposed to prevention programs before the stress becomes potentially unmanageable, they will likely develop unhealthy coping mechanisms because they have not been taught otherwise. There should be preventative stress management programs available for general education students imbedded in the daily curriculum to enhance the overall mental health of students and help them cope with the inevitable daily stressors of school.

**Rationale**

Many adults underestimate the long lasting and potentially adverse effects stress and anxiety can have on the social, cognitive, and behavioral development of students. If addressed at an early age by a teacher who is educated in the field of stress management and who uses a variety of tools to teach students about it, students are less likely to develop depression and mental health concerns, and more likely to develop improved feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy and overall health status (Fallin, Wallinga & Coleman, 2001). I believe that it is vital for teachers to talk about stress and anxiety because it is a very real and serious part of daily life. Even as an adult, when I am stressed I still face unexplained headaches and stomachaches that at times leaves me unable to do the simplest of tasks. Like so many people, I had to learn how to cope with stress on my own—no one ever taught me healthy ways to handle the constant ebb and flow of life. It is this personal experience with stress that helps shape my conviction that a proactive approach to stress management is an important and necessary part of a child's school life. Teachers spend five days a week with their students and I believe we should use that time wisely. Academic growth and development is paramount for students, however I argue that without the ability to manage stress, students will be unable to perform to their full academic extent. We must first begin with a good foundation of overall mental health of our students to give them the best opportunity to succeed. Such knowledge and techniques of a preventative stress management program can be applied to create a program that aims to enhance the overall mental health of students while also helping them cope with the inevitable daily stressors of school. A program designed to compliment the academic curriculum and one that is infused with daily teaching will set the stage for students to manage stress and develop a personal awareness of their own self-welfare. If educators are able to reach students before they experience

significant stress, they can reduce the chance that students develop unhealthy coping mechanisms or become emotionally and/or behaviorally disabled. In doing so, teachers are providing their students the most positive and encouraging environment to excel cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do elementary level students perceive to be stressful?
2. What are some academic, social, and behavioral effects of stress on elementary school students?
3. In what ways do students cope with stress?
4. What kinds of stress management programs have been successfully used in stress and anxiety reduction?
5. What elements are important to include in a stress management program?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Perceived Stress of Elementary Level Students**

School aged students face a number of school assignments, social situations, afterschool activities, and pressure from parents and teachers that can all be a catalyst for stress. Oftentimes, adults are unaware of the tremendous effect school and family-related stressors have on the overall well-being and development of elementary aged children. Research addresses concerns about the lasting effects stress can have on students and identifies ways in which educators can help ease the level of stress on their students. Common research themes are perceived stress in children, manifestations of stress, adverse side effects of stress, as well as best practices for teachers to implement in order to reduce stress levels in their students. In addressing each of the above-mentioned themes, researchers attempt to inform educators that stress is a very real and

potentially adverse threat to the social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development of children. In addition to bringing awareness to the important topic of childhood stress, there are practical strategies teachers can use to adapt their curriculum in order to provide students with the most supportive environment to challenge negative side effects of stress.

**Student Stressors.** There are many aspects of daily school life that can be considered stressful to school aged students. Stress is the human body's response to demands made upon it when the demands become too difficult and exceed an individual's capability to cope (Onchwari, 2010). Depending on the cognitive, emotional, developmental level, and experiences of an individual, situations can be considered stressful to one and not another. In other words, it is almost impossible to judge if a situation will be considered stressful among all students; each individual responds to stress in different ways ("Six Myths About Stress," n.d.). There are, however, certain school situations that have been shown to cause stress in a vast majority of school-aged students. Academic stressors for students can include doing well in school, test anxiety, fear of success or failure, pressure from teachers, peer pressure, socialization and relationship with peers, too much homework, or teacher-student conflict (Brown, Nobling, Teufel, & Birch, 2011; Fallin, et al, 2001; Munsey 2010; Onchwari, 2010; Romano, 1997; Salend, 2012). Such examples of school related stressors can affect a student in any amount and can have a profoundly lasting impact on them into adulthood. In addition to school specific stressors, many other familial, economic, and societal situations can be considered stressful to students. Examples of these kinds of stressors include the death of a parent, parental unemployment, living in poverty, physical abuse, neglect, and malnourishment to name a few (Onchwari, 2010). In addition, family dynamics, parental economic stability, obesity, and physical appearance can also be considered stressful to young students (Lantieri & Nambiar,

2012; Munsey, 2010; “Stressed in America,” 2011). Regardless of where stress originates for students, it is important that teachers are aware that there can be a multitude of stressors in a student’s life, not just school related ones.

**Manifestation of Stress in Students.** In addition to knowing where childhood stress comes from, it is equally important to be aware of the ways in which it manifests itself in students. Knowing the behavioral, emotional, physical, and academic manifestations of stress can greatly aid teachers in recognizing stress in students and provide a better baseline for teachers to help students cope in a healthy way. Examples of behavioral, emotional, and physical manifestations of stress include regressive behaviors, withdrawal, irritability, negative self-statements, avoidance, apathy, habitual absences, fatigue, hunger, unexplained headaches and stomachaches, and/ or having pessimistic expectations of oneself (Fallin, et al, 2001; Munsey, 2010; Salend, 2012; “Stress Tip Sheet,” 2007; “Stressed in America” 2011). Such behavioral manifestations are only a few of the responses to stress and such symptoms of stress can abruptly begin or have a gradual onset. It is important that teachers get to know their students and their normal behaviors in order to identify a behavioral shift. In some cases, students “act out” and become aggressive and physically violent towards peers and teachers (Romano, 1997). Academically, stress manifests itself in the form of failing grades, difficulty concentrating on exams, conflict with teachers, and a lack of interest in activities (Fallin, et al, 2001; Salend, 2012, “Stressed in America”, 2011). It is important to note that the list of manifestations of stress on students is much longer than the abridged version mentioned above. Stress can manifest itself in a number of ways on students so it is important that teachers are aware of the different ways it may present itself.

### **Adverse Side Effects of Stress on Students**

In addition to understanding what is stressful to students and ways in which stress can manifest, teachers should be aware of the potential adverse side effects. Stress is a natural and daily part of everyone's life; however, it can have lasting negative impacts on those who experience it, regardless of their age. In some cases, children who experience stress see impacts on their cognitive domain, affecting their ability of higher order thinking, creating a learned helplessness, and reduced self-esteem (Onchwari, 2010). The decline of cognitive abilities can prevent students from making reasoned decisions, delay conflict resolution skills, and reduce the student's ability to work collaboratively with others. Stress can also drastically hinder a student's ability to perform well academically as well as increase outbreaks of negative behaviors. If such academic and behavioral problems persist, students can begin to develop negative feelings about school, thus perpetuating academic failure. In addition, if students are underachieving in school due to stress, their social and emotional development may suffer because of the negative impact on peer relationships (Fallin, et al, 2001; Salend, 2012). If negative attitudes continue to develop with respect to school and personal relationships, the stress can begin to affect grades, promotions, graduation, and even post-secondary opportunities (Salend, 2012); if students are not doing well academically, it is unlikely they will receive adequate, if any, postgraduate schooling, thus reducing the opportunity for higher-salaried, stable jobs. Individuals experiencing high levels of stress may also be at risk for more serious health issues, such as substance abuse, depression, suicide, and psychological and physical problems (Foret, Scult, Wilcher, Chudnofsky, Malloy, Hasheminejad & Park 2012; Munsey, 2010). Later in life, stress may manifest itself through medical conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, or obesity (Munsey, 2010; "Stress Tip Sheet", 2007).

### **Techniques to Reduce Stress in Students**

While stress can come from many places and manifest in different ways, there are means in which teachers can reach all students without having to create programs specific to individuals. Effective strategies for teachers to utilize in order to reduce the amount of stress in the lives of students include, but are not limited to: facilitating group discussions; teaching relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, guided meditation and yoga; providing positive feedback and encouragement to students; promoting social friendships among students; orchestrating opportunities for students to practice decision making and time management skills; controlling testing situations; regularly scheduling exams; relating content to student lives; and involving parents inside and outside of the classroom (Brown, et al, 2011; Fallin, et al, 2001; Foret, et al, 2012; Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012; Cole, Craighead, Dodson-Lavelle, Negi, Ozawa-de Silva, Pace, Raison, & Reddy, 2013; Romano, 1997; Salend, 2012; “Stress Tip Sheet, 2007; “Tips on Classroom...,” 2004). Teachers can also reduce the level of stress by enforcing daily routines, discuss fears and worries with students, provide cooperative learning activities, and engage in daily classroom meetings (Campbell, 2006). In addition, teachers can promote relaxation in their classroom through the use of a peace corner (a spot for quiet meditation in the room) and use calming music for transitions (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012). There are a plethora of strategies that teachers can use in the classroom to promote overall wellness and reduce the amount of stress on a student. While teachers may not be able to control or limit familial or economic stressors of students, they can work towards reducing stress loads in the classroom. By using strategies that reduce school stress from the lives of students, teachers hinder the adverse effects of stress on students. In addition, such techniques can be taught to students and

be differentiated in the curriculum to better prepare all students to cope with other types of stress in healthy ways that will help them into adulthood.

### **Coping With Stress**

**A Definition of Coping and Contributing Factors.** Stress can have numerous side effects on young students and the degree to which they cope with stress can greatly impact how debilitating those side effects can be. Coping is defined as “efforts to master conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available” (Fallin, et al, 2001, p. 18). In other words, coping is a purposeful response by the individual to handle situations they perceive to be stressful. Coping is not an automatic response to stress in which the individual has no control; the ways in which individuals cope are deciduous and intentional. The basic definition of coping elicits certain implications for elementary level teachers and students that can have lasting positive effects on the way stress impacts students. In recognizing that coping mechanisms are purposeful in nature, the teacher can shape the ways in which students cope with stress by teaching them healthy techniques to cope. While a student’s coping mechanism may be implemented deliberately, specific strategies are affected by personal, environmental, gender, and age factors (Fallin, et al, 2001; Romano, 1997). Factors such as parental involvement, personal control, maturity level, and social support networks also greatly impact the degree to which stress affects a student and the kinds of coping resources used (Fallin, et al, 2001, Romano, 1997).

**Cognitive Transactional Model.** According to the Cognitive Transactional Model, people and their environments are considered to be engaged in a constant and dynamic relationship that evokes cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of an individual, which in turn affects the environment (Fallin, et al, 2001). This relationship between the individual and

environment directly relates to the way in which individuals cope with stress because different environmental and personal factors elicit different responses to situations. As a result of the intricate personal-environmental relationship, the coping mechanisms used by students can range greatly and have varying levels of effectiveness.

**How Students Cope with Stress.** An understanding that the environment greatly influences the manner in which individuals cope can help teachers realize that each student will cope differently, even if the stressors are the same. The Cognitive Transactional Model as explained above provides the foundation for students to cope with stressors. The desired outcome of coping strategies are usually categorized into two areas: strategies that help alter the frequency or intensity of stressors, and the other to better deal with the emotions associated with being under stress (Fallin, Wallinga & Coleman, 2001). There are also a number of factors that influence the kinds of coping strategies utilized by students such as a student's health, energy, their beliefs about themselves, problem solving skills, self-esteem and social support (Fallin, et al, 2001). Regardless of the outcomes of coping, research shows that students alone have developed quite healthy ways to cope with stress without the guidance of an adult (Romano, 1997). A constructed-response research study of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students show that students use various strategies such as getting help from a friend, self-reliance, distancing, or internalizing to handle stressful situations (Romano, 1997). Other research has demonstrated that students utilize cognitive strategies like positive thinking, having positive beliefs about oneself, and wishful thinking (Fallin, et al, 2001; Romano 1997). In addition, students have a tendency to express their emotions in more behavioral forms such as increased physical activity, acting out, or externalizing (yelling, screaming) to manage stressful situations (Fallin, et al, 2001; Romano,

1997). Furthermore, students have also been known to play with peers, engage in physical activity, listen to music, or watch TV to cope with stress (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012).

**Implications for Classroom Teachers.** The research surrounding how students cope with stress has many implications for the elementary level teacher. First, it is important to note that many of the coping mechanisms used by students were relatively healthy. Also, the school is in prime position to be a positive environmental factor for students. As mentioned above, positive environmental factors can lead to positive coping while negative factors can lead to unhealthy ways to cope. It is important that teachers continue to emphasize positive and healthy strategies to cope with daily stressors. Managed stress can lead to productive and happy lives for students while a lack of stress management or mismanagement of stress can hurt or kill people (“Six Myths About Stress, n.d.), therefore it is vital students are being taught how to manage appropriately. Teachers can easily integrate teaching coping strategies into the academic curriculum and should do so regularly. Good skills for young students to learn that can positively influence coping include: decision-making, time management, goal setting, collaborating with peers, and discussing fears (Brown, et al, 2011; Fallin, et al, 2001; Romano, 1997). The life skills that will help students better cope with stress are also necessary for students to succeed academically, socially, and behaviorally, and are ones that are useful all the way into adulthood. Teachers can implement such skills easily into the curriculum without altering the foundation of their lessons, thus upholding content standards. For example, teachers can use science to teach about biological responses, social studies to discuss problem solving and conflict resolution skills, and literature to reflect upon character responses to stress stimuli. It is also important that students get enough sleep, eat healthy, and exercise (Munsey, 2010; “Stress Tip Sheet,” 2007) to help reduce daily stress. By integrating skills into the curriculum that

directly influences coping, a teacher not only prepares students academically, but subsequently prepares students to become successful and contributing members of society.

### **Successful Anxiety and Stress Reducing Programs**

**Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy.** A basic understanding of student stressors and coping mechanisms naturally leads to a discussion about programs related to reducing the overall stress of students while also teaching them healthy ways to manage stress. There have been many successful programs and therapies used to help people combat anxiety and stress so they may lead healthier and more productive lives. One such therapy is known as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that focuses on the relationship between one's thoughts and one's behaviors. CBT is useful for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, anxiety, and severe stress. CBT also goes beyond anxiety reducing treatments for general education students and focuses on the effects that CBT has on students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) (Schoenfeld & Mathur, 2009). CBT has become a standard method used to treat anxiety in children in large and small groups, as well as in child-focused and parent-focused groups - and the effects are long lasting. In addition to CBT, researchers have studied different types of programs that aim to reduce the stress and anxiety in the lives of students.

**FRIENDS.** The FRIENDS study conducted in a private school, examined the effects of CBT on four criteria: student anxiety, academic engagement, school-appropriate behavior, and social validity. There were twelve bi-weekly sessions in which participants met for 30-minutes each. Topics addressed in the FRIENDS program included rapport building with the therapist, identification of frightening and anxiety provoking situations, exploration of individual responses to anxiety, relaxation training, self-talk, modeling and practicing of self-talk, problem

solving strategies, and self evaluation (Schoenfeld & Mathur, 2009). In order to maintain the validity and reliability of the study, baseline data was collected on the four criteria; information regarding the nature of the study was controlled from participants, teachers, and observers. The research concluded that all students rated lower for anxiety, demonstrated an upward trend in academic engagement, an increase in school appropriate behaviors, a desire to continue treatment, and social validity of CBT (Schoenfeld & Mathur, 2009).

**Implications of the FRIENDS Program.** This small-scale study suggests that CBT is an effective way to reduce anxiety in students with EBD. This study indicated that the effectiveness of CBT is compelling because each participant showed improvements among all criteria. Programs like this would be effective for EBD labeled students as well as students with generalized anxiety and stress. The components of the program were successful because they offered participants a way to comfortably discuss their anxiety and presented opportunities to practice anxiety reduction strategies in a controlled and safe environment. The participants were guided through anxiety reduction and were not left to fend for themselves.

**Cognitive-Behavioral Group Therapy for Adolescents.** Another clinic-based program designed for reducing anxiety is known as Cognitive-Behavioral Group Therapy for Adolescents (CBGT-A). CBGT-A focuses on psycho education, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, social skills, and behavioral exposure (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004). The program is designed to provide students with social anxiety opportunities to practice positive and appropriate interactions and demonstrate the individual unrealistic fears of social situations. The program consisted of sixteen 90-minute group sessions to help students deal with social anxiety. The participants in this study showed a significant decrease in social phobia compared to controls, however there were no longer differences in a 12-month follow up. Although there

were no longer differences a year after the CBGT-A, the overall initial decrease of social anxiety suggests that if a program with similar components lasted longer, the results may become more permanent.

**Social Skills Training.** Social Skills Training (SST) is a program that emphasizes social skills training and exposure and also includes skills such as problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation techniques (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004). This study conducted on the program was 12 weeks long and consisted of once a week, hour long, group sessions with a 30-minute practice of learned strategies in a controlled practice environment. While SST was similar in components and intended outcomes as CBGT-A, gains made by participants involved with SST were maintained over a 12-month follow-up. The main difference between SST and CBGT-A is the 30-minute controlled practice of learned skills. This suggests that constant practice of learned skills may have more lasting effects on student anxiety.

**Social Effectiveness Therapy for Children.** Social Effectiveness Therapy for Children (SET-C) is a program that uses a behavioral approach to anxiety disorders which focuses on behavioral exposure and social skills training. This treatment study was 12-weeks long, had bi-weekly sessions, and was designed for children between the ages of 8 through 12. The skills developed in SET-C were practiced through group training and peer generalization with familiar and unfamiliar peers. Each of the participants of this study showed marked improvements in anxiety symptoms and the improvements were maintained in a 6-month follow up (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004).

**Skills for Academic and Social Success.** Skills for Academic and Social Success (SASS) is a cognitive-behavioral model of intervention for high school students with social

anxiety disorders. SASS was developed to help teach socially anxious students social skills and coping strategies within the school setting. The SASS intervention study included twelve weekly group school sessions and its components included personal identification of anxiety symptoms, overcoming shyness and social phobia, identification of negative expectations, and social skills such as initiating a conversation, establishing friendships, listening and remembering, and assertiveness (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004). While participants of SASS had reduced anxiety symptoms, it is unclear as to how long lasting or effective the program was.

**Cognitive-Based Compassion Training.** Cognitive-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) is a program that teaches active thought on loving-kindness, empathy, and compassion towards loved ones, strangers, and enemies (Cole, et al, 2013). While CBCT was primarily used for children in foster care who have higher rates of negative life experiences, the skills encouraged through this program are similar to those used in stress reduction programs. CBCT uses cognitive restructuring to develop a mindfulness that fosters acceptance and understanding of others. Strategies such as physical activity (stretching, balance, posture and yoga), compassion meditation, ignore/walk away, perspective taking, and deep breathing were taught to the children involved in the program as ways to handle adversity; similar strategies have been used in other stress management programs. Overall the program was noted a success based on the self-report measures of the participants involved. The majority of the children positively evaluated the program and reported that they used the strategies learned to deal with angry feelings and stress. In addition, the participants who frequently engaged in meditation sessions outside the program reported lowered anxiety. While the overall effectiveness of this program in terms of stress and anxiety reduction remains to be determined (given the demographics

involved, not students), the positive feedback given by participants suggests that components of this program could be successfully used for stress reduction (Cole, et al, 2013).

**Social and Emotional Learning.** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) supports the notion that schools not only support academic knowledge, but also learners who are self aware, caring, connected to others, and active contributors to the world (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012). SEL is based on the premise that skills used in school can also be effective for success in life. SEL takes aspects of child development, classroom management, prevention of problem behavior, and the role of the brain for cognitive and social growth. The competencies and skills taught to students in SEL include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL is implemented first through development and explicit teaching of such skills. SEL is also focused on creating positive school environments that are self-directed and well managed in order to facilitate positive social and emotional growth. Many of the skills taught in SEL are authentic, meaning they are skills defined as essential for effectiveness in the modern job market. The effectiveness of SEL has been documented. One major multi-year study found that as adults, students in grades 1-6 involved in SEL had higher levels of school commitment and completion at the age of 18. In addition, the rate of students who had to repeat grades in grades 1-6 was 14% compared to 23% of non-participants. The academic gains participants made shows that SEL is an effective program for academics as well as social and emotional growth. The competencies valued in SEL are all skills that are also useful in stress management (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012).

**Relaxation Response-Based Curriculum.** Another successful program that helped reduce stress and anxiety in students is known as a Relaxation Response-Based Curriculum, RR for short. RR consists of explicit instruction, relaxation exercises, positive psychology, and

cognitive restructuring (Foret, et al, 2012). A RR curriculum helps reduce stress and improves stress management in students by decreasing perceived stress, increasing self-esteem, and promoting healthy behaviors. A RR curriculum primarily focuses on teaching students how to relax through meditation, yoga, tai chi, and deep breathing. Participants in a 1994 study were high school students receiving RR training three times a week for a semester (approximately four months) during health class. These students showed a significant increase in self-esteem. A second study (2000) of RR training took place in an urban middle school, where the teacher taught the skills to her students in class. The results of this study were also positive; the students who received RR training had higher GPA's and more effective work habits than those who did not (Foret, et al, 2012). In a third study in 2002, college students received six 90-minute RR sessions and saw a reduction in psychological symptoms of stress, anxiety, and perceived stress than the control group. The most recent study in RR training took place in 2012 at a high school and involved 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. The participants were exposed to eight 45-minute RR sessions over four weeks during physical education class. Students were taught techniques to help guide relaxation that included meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, and imagery/visualization. Students also created a gratitude journal and were taught cognitive restructuring techniques in order to change stressful unhealthy mind frames and thoughts. Students continued RR training at home, with five to ten minute daily-guided meditation audio tracks. The results of the study showed that RR intervention demonstrated positive changes in perceived stress and anxiety and an increase in stress management behaviors. The researchers of this study found it effective, as it helped reduce the overall perceived stress and anxiety of the students involved. This approach proved that a stress management program could be integrated into a typical academic setting with success (Foret, et al, 2012).

### **Implications of Anxiety and Stress Reduction Programs**

Identification of anxiety symptoms and anxiety provoking situations, exploration of individual responses to anxiety, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, and social skills (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004; (Schoenfeld & Mathur, 2009) are elements of programs that have been successful in reducing the overall anxiety of school aged students. While the lasting effects of each of the programs are not always maintained in follow up studies, it is clear that intervention programs aimed at reducing anxiety compared to no treatment show the absolute effectiveness of such programs (Fischer, Masia-Warner, & Klein, 2004). The implication of the studies are that programs designed to be preventative in nature and implemented at the classroom level, using the proven successful components of exploration of individual responses to anxiety, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, and social skills, will be very effective. If addressing anxiety and stress reduction techniques to students before the anxiety becomes overbearing, it will reduce the likelihood of lasting adverse side effects of stress.

### **Preventative Suggestions**

Stress and anxiety are undoubtedly part of the daily lives of elementary level students. While the majority of stress reduction programs available to children are used as intervention for students already experiencing anxiety and stress, taking a more proactive approach to this aspect of mental health can prevent such programs from being necessary. If teachers combat stress and anxiety before it poses a problem, students will be more equipped to handle the stressors of daily life without it consuming them. Preventative programs provide students with the skill set they need to face stressors in a confident and effective manner. It is through the analysis of

intervention programs, however, that teachers will be able to find a pattern of important stress and anxiety reduction components and successfully integrate them into the school day.

**Components of an Effective Stress Reduction Program.** As mentioned above, skills such as identification of stressors, cognitive reconstruction, problem solving, and social skills (Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004; Schoenfeld & Mathur, 2009) are all part of successful intervention programs. These components can be adapted to become more preventative in nature when taught to students explicitly and with opportunities for practice. As students become more effective in using these skills, their relationship with stress can change and become more positive. These skills can be addressed with students on a weekly basis with time set aside for guided practice and role playing to further develop the skill set in students. In addition to focusing on hard skills, it is important that preventative programs reinforce and develop existing coping patterns of students (Romano, 1997). In doing so, the teacher builds upon student responses to assist students to cope effectively with stress. Effective skill sets and effective coping strategies can prepare students to face stressors before they become overwhelming.

**Ways Teachers can Encourage Students and Reduce Stress in Classroom.** While it is important to focus on specific anxiety reducing skills that prepare students to manage stress, there are a variety of other elements that should be included in preventative programs that teach students how to deal with stress. As mentioned earlier, it is important that teachers reinforce and develop good coping strategies. Effective practices in the classroom that teachers can implement regularly (as opposed to weekly, as the anxiety reduction skills can be reinforced) can be stress identification, goal setting, problem solving, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, yoga, stress balls, and guided imagery, and positive talk (Brown, Nobiling, Teufel & Birch 2011; Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004; Romano 1997; Salend, 2012). In addition, teachers can

make changes to their teaching style to positively affect the stress level of the students in their classroom. Creating student-friendly tests, fostering socialization, lessening homework loads, regularly evaluating and reevaluating student performance, providing positive encouragement, and taking professional developmental courses on child psychology are all ways teachers can foster a positive environment in their classroom and reduce overall anxiety (Brown, Nobiling, Teufel & Birch 2011; Fisher, Masia-Warner & Klein, 2004; Onchwari. 2010; Salend, 2012). Other ways teachers can help reduce anxiety and stress in their students is to provide routines, model making mistakes, reward effort, talk to students about worries and fears, and use classroom meetings to facilitate discussion about stress (Campbell, 2006).

## **Conclusions**

Stress is a natural and inescapable part of human existence. Individuals, both young and old, experience different degrees of stress and cope using a wide range of behaviors and resources. Students spend the majority of their early life in the classroom; therefore teachers have the advantage of helping young students learn about stress and learn healthy ways to cope. It is absolutely imperative that teachers address stress management in a preventative fashion in order to equip students with healthy resources to combat stress once they encounter it. By providing students with tools and resources to learn about stress, they will have a head start before the stressors become overwhelming. By teaching students the skills needed to reduce and combat the adverse effects of stress, we not only help them cope with stress, we help students become successful in unfavorable and stressful life situations. Research has shown that there are long lasting benefits to teaching students about stress, with research findings providing many proven strategies which teachers can easily implement into their own classrooms. These small changes teachers can make to a daily classroom schedule not only positively affect students

during the day, but can also have long lasting and extremely positive effects on the emotional, cognitive, academic, and physical health of students into adulthood.

### **Application**

The application product I chose to create was a teacher handbook on preventing and managing stress loads in the elementary classroom. I wanted to create something that outlined basic student stressors, explained common manifestations of stress, as well as provided practical strategies teachers can use in the classroom without disrupting the entire academic day. In addition, I wanted my handout to be visually appealing and interesting to read so that teachers were more likely to use the information presented. The handbook was primarily created for in-service teachers, however preservice teacher candidates could get substantial use out of it as well. I believe that it is extremely important for teachers to be aware of the importance of creating a calm and stress reduced environment so students can have the best possible setting to learn and develop academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

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**Appendix**

Cool, Calm, and Collected: A Guide for Busy Teachers to Integrating Stress Management into Your Everyday Routine.