

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS AND ANXIETY ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Shaymardonova Dilafruz Almatovna

Abstract: This article examines the psychological nature of stress and anxiety in preschool children, particularly those aged 5–6, as well as the factors contributing to their emergence and their impact on emotional and volitional development. Within the scope of the study, the forms of manifestation of stress and anxiety in a child's psyche, diagnostic possibilities, and psychoprophylactic approaches are analyzed. The article has methodological significance for educators and psychologists working in the preschool education system.

Key words: preschool age, mental state, stress, anxiety, emotional development, psychological adaptation.

Introduction. In modern psychology and pedagogy, the issue of preserving and strengthening children's mental health is recognized as one of the priority areas. In particular, the preschool period is a crucial stage in the formation of a child's personality, during which stress and anxiety states that arise can have a direct impact on further development.

In the lives of children aged 5–6, the expansion of social experience, an increase in educational demands, and entry into a new system of social relationships can be observed. These processes place a certain psychological burden on the child's emotional state. Therefore, the scientific study of the psychological characteristics of stress and anxiety during this age period is of particular relevance.

Stress is a psychophysiological adaptive response of the organism to the influence of external or internal factors. In scientific literature, stress is explained as a disruption of the organism's balance and the activation of protective mechanisms in response to this disruption.

In preschool children, stress is predominantly social and psychological in nature and manifests itself in connection with educational demands, systems of relationships, and emotional experiences. Since children are not fully capable of consciously understanding and verbally expressing stress, it is often manifested through behavior and somatic symptoms.

Anxiety is an internal state of uneasiness experienced by an individual in anticipation of an uncertain or potentially negative situation. From a psychological perspective, anxiety is divided into trait (stable) and state (situational) types.

In children aged 5–6, anxiety is mainly situational and is associated with adaptation to a new environment, dependence on adult evaluation, and fear of failure. This condition can negatively affect the child's emotional stability.

The senior preschool age occupies a significant place in a child's psychological development. At this stage, the following characteristics are observed:

- active development of cognitive processes;
- dominance of imagination and figurative thinking;
- high level of emotional sensitivity;
- initial formation of self-esteem;
- strong dependence on adult opinions.

These characteristics increase children's sensitivity to stress and anxiety. Negative psychological influences may be deeply reflected in the child's inner emotional experiences.

Factors Contributing to Stress and Anxiety in Preschool Children

Stress and anxiety in children aged 5–6 are multifactorial and can be classified into the following groups:

Family-related factors – the psychological climate within the family has a direct impact on the child's emotional state. Parental conflicts, inconsistency in upbringing, excessive demands, or emotional neglect contribute to the development of stress and anxiety.

Educational institution-related factors – adaptation to a preschool educational institution, relationships with teachers, and social interactions with peers significantly influence the child's psychological state. Constant criticism or repeated experiences of failure intensify stress.

Individual psychological factors – individual characteristics such as temperament, level of emotional stability, and self-confidence determine a child's vulnerability to stress and anxiety.

In preschool children, stress and anxiety manifest through the following signs:

emotional instability (irritability, frequent crying);

disturbances in sleep and eating patterns;

reduced social activity;

shyness and withdrawn behavior;

psychosomatic complaints.

In some cases, regressive behaviors may be observed, meaning the reappearance of behaviors characteristic of earlier developmental stages.

In recent years, the problem of stress and anxiety in children has been examined as a distinct scientific field in both international and national research. In contemporary psychology, stress is interpreted as the result of a mismatch between a child's individual resources and environmental demands, with adaptive capacity occupying a central role.

According to the cognitive-psychological approach, the way a child perceives and evaluates a situation determines the level of stress. In children aged 5–6, cognitive appraisal mechanisms are not yet sufficiently developed, making them more vulnerable to stress and inclined to perceive uncertain situations as threatening.

Within emotional-developmental theories, stress is viewed as a factor that can enrich emotional experience but may lead to negative outcomes if not properly regulated.

Psychological studies indicate that anxiety gradually develops during childhood. By the age of 5–6, children begin to evaluate their behavior from a social perspective, which creates a basis for the intensification of anxiety.

At this age, anxiety develops in the following forms:

social anxiety (behavior among peers);

evaluation-related anxiety (fear of adult judgment);

separation anxiety (fear of separation from parents).

If these types of anxiety become stable, limitations in the child's social development may occur.

In preschool children, stress is directly related to the functional state of the central nervous system. During stress, the hormone cortisol is released, which can negatively affect brain functioning when exposure is prolonged.

Scientific research indicates that prolonged stress:

weakens attention and memory processes;

impairs emotional regulation mechanisms;

increases impulsive behavior.

Since the nervous system of children aged 5–6 is not yet fully mature, the neuropsychological effects of stress are more pronounced.

The process of socialization, which involves mastering social norms and rules, becomes more complicated under conditions of stress and anxiety. Anxious children often:

avoid communication;

show little initiative;

remain passive in group activities.

These behaviors hinder the development of social competencies and may lead to social isolation from peers.

Influence of Stress and Anxiety on Play Activity

Play is the leading activity in preschool age. Under conditions of stress and anxiety, both the content and quality of play change. In particular:

role-playing games become less frequent;

repetitive and stereotypical actions increase;

aggressive or passive scenarios prevail.

These changes indirectly reflect the child's inner emotional experiences and serve as important indicators for psychological diagnosis.

In applied psychology, it is important to distinguish stress and anxiety from other emotional states:

fear is associated with a specific object;

stress results from adaptive overload;

anxiety is characterized by anticipation of an undefined threat.

Psychological services in the preschool education system play a crucial role in preventing stress and anxiety. The activities of a preschool psychologist should include:

systematic diagnostics;

cooperation with educators;

training sessions and seminars for parents;

individual and group corrective interventions.

A systematic approach helps prevent the stabilization of stress and anxiety states.

Prolonged stress and anxiety negatively affect the process of personality formation in children. In particular, these states lead to:

reduced emotional stability;

difficulties in social adaptation;

decreased cognitive activity;

lowered self-esteem.

If these conditions are not addressed in a timely manner, various psychological difficulties may arise during the child's adaptation to school education.

Observation, interviews, projective methods, and psychological diagnostic tools are used to identify stress and anxiety. Psychological assistance includes:

play therapy;

art therapy;

relaxation exercises;

psychological counseling for parents.

Preventive measures contribute to the healthy emotional development of the child.

In conclusion, stress and anxiety in preschool children aged 5–6 are closely related to their age-specific, social, and individual psychological characteristics. Early identification and prevention of these conditions are essential for ensuring healthy personality development. Cooperation between families, educational institutions, and specialists plays a key role in reducing the negative consequences of stress and anxiety.

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