

Factors Contributing to the Problematic Condition of 'Hurried Child Syndrome' in Children and Adolescents

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We live in a time-regulated society, emphasizing speed, instant results, fast foods, and rapid services. Most people are following the fast current, and this fast current is growing rapidly faster, giving rise to a problem known as 'the hurried child.' It is a condition in which the schedule of children is overfilled; they are pushed for academic success, along with other extracurricular activities, and are expected to behave as a replica of adults. A child is expected by the parent(s) to perform beyond his or her level of mental, social or emotional capabilities. This research paper will elucidate the chief factors that are conducive to giving rise to the condition known as a 'hurried child.' The overview will shed light on the synergistic effect of multiple factors and constituents that are responsible for various physical, emotional, behavioral, psychological, and social problems in children and adolescents.

Keywords: Hurried child, new family styles, childhood moves indoors, child as a consumer, academic pressure, dynamics of media and internet, parental peer pressure, miniature adults

The concept of *the hurried child* was proposed by Professor David Elkind (1981). *Hurried child syndrome* is a set of stress linked behaviours, which result when a child is expected by the parents to perform beyond his or her level of mental, social or emotional capabilities. Basically, parents over-schedule lives of children, push them hard for academic success and expect them to behave and react as miniature adults. The continuation of old pressures along with the new ones on parents for child competence are making the situation even worse. Chief among them is the pressure for early intellectual attainment, deriving from a changed perception of precocity. Various means of mass communication, such as films, internet and television, depict young people as rather-ripe. Children and adolescents are presented clearly in sexual or manipulative situations by these sources of media. Such portrayals on various platforms force children to think they should act grown up before they are ready (Elkind, 2004, 2007). There are two

types of hurrying: calendar hurrying and clock hurrying. The first one occurs when we ask children to understand beyond their limits of understanding, to decide beyond their capacity to make decisions or to act wilfully before they have the will to act. Clock hurrying occurs, whenever, through our excessive demands over a short time, we force children to call upon their energy reserves (Elkind, 2001, 2007). Elkind (2004) reported that, hurrying is a subjective dimension for youngsters. Perception of hurrying by children and adolescents is based on their mental development, temperament, past experiences, intelligence and other significant factors.

Factors contributing to hurried child syndrome

The effects of pushing children hard to grow up fast, has a significant impact on their intellectual, emotional, and social development. In this process of growing up fast children often skip important

achievements of particular stages of development and causes problems in later life (Elkind, 2001). Some of the key factors that contribute to the condition of hurried children in the contemporary society are:

New family lifestyles: Researchers have shown that children who live with their biological parents experience overall better outcomes. This is because parents provide emotional and social support along with economic security to their off-spring(s). It shapes the parent-child relationships, brings in a kind of organization at home, and taking out family time plus using it conventionally, is advantageous for both, children and parents (Fomby et al. 2011; Amato 2010; Foster and Kalil, 2007; Gibson-Davis & Gassman-Pines, 2010). Change in family structures because of divorce, remarriage or any other reasons involve transformation and adaptation by the child, and it affects the well-being of the child and gives way to behavioral problems in many (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Cavanagh and Huston, 2008; Osborne and McLanahan 2007).

Kelly (1993) reported that children of divorced parents when compared to children of never-divorced parents, have significantly more adjustment problems. Children of divorced parents exhibit more aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors, have more difficulties in their peer relationships, are less compliant with authority figures, and show more problem behaviors at school. Tiwary and Prasad (2005), in their work on domestic violence, observed that the children who witness violence at home display emotional and behavioral disturbances as diverse as withdrawal, low self-esteem, nightmares, and aggression against peers and family members. Adolescents, who have been exposed to inter-parental domestic violence, find it difficult to engage themselves in more positive ways of social interaction. Conflicts among parents and conflicts of the child/adolescent with a dominant opposite-

sex parent are predictors of major adolescent psychopathology. It was also reported that, several studies have revealed significant relationships between inter-parental conflict and anxiety, depression, stress, and/or hostility in adolescents.

Childhood moves indoors: Human exposure to nature plays an important role in individuals' cognitive, motor and socio-emotional development during the critical stages of development (World Health Organization, 2021). There is a close association between contact with nature and psychological well-being that promotes the overall health of individuals (Markevych et al., 2014; Mårtensson et al., 2009). Playing in children involves actions that are voluntary and self-controlled. It is impulsive, unpremeditated, free, natural, unforced and initiated by the self (Wiltz & Fein, 2006). Fattore et al. (2009) have shown that, well being and feelings that come after/while playing are closely related to each other. It has been reported that the basic features of a child's play have changed in the last five decades (Nordbakke, 2018; Woolley & Griffin, 2015; Skar and Krogh, 2009 & Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

Engagement of children in outdoor play and activities has been scaled down (Woolley and Griffin, 2015; Skar and Krogh, 2009 & Gaster, 1991). Reduction in natural areas for playing (Aitken, 1994; and Karsten, 2005), advancement in technology, particularly: internet and electronic games (Karsten, 2005), working parents (Hays, 1996; and Shaw, 1996), and urbanization and increase in traffic (Gaster, 1991 and Little & Wyver, 2008). Along with these factors many others have been identified by the researchers as potential promoters of 'hurried child syndrome', such as - indulgence of children in activities supervised by parents or any other elder, rather than unsupervised activities in nature (Jensen et al. 2004; Mattson 2002), perception of leisure time by

parents as learning time for their off-springs to acquire or enhance skills for a better future (Lareau, 2002; Jurczyk et al., 2004; and Griffin, 1993). Katz (2008) referred to this perception of parents regarding leisure time of children and involvement in supervised activities as 'overscheduled childhood'.

Child as a consumer: The marketers and advertisers now consider children a separate market segment (Pazheva, 2024). Calvert (2008) addressed that advertising for children primarily involves television spots that feature toys, clothes, and food products, most of which are high in fat and sugar but low in nutritional value. New marketing approaches have led to online advertising and to cautious marketing techniques, such as embedding products in the program content in films, online and in video games. Such strategies make children younger than eight years of age, more vulnerable because they lack the cognitive skills to understand the persuasive intent of television and online advertisements. New techniques influence even the older children and adolescents. Children now live and grow up in a highly sophisticated marketing environment that influences their behaviours and preferences. McNeal (1992) explored that children are considered future market by the marketers, because of the development of favourable attitudes in children towards brands, which continue to grow into adulthood as well.

Many factors have been researched for the socialization of children as consumers. Among all other factors, the 'media messages' through television, the internet, billboards/hoardings, banners, commercials on various platforms, etc., have been found to be the most influential. It has also been observed that marketers reach children through socially responsible strategies like: logos and names of brands on pens, notebooks, bags, pencil box/pouches etc. (Sramova, 2017). Dotson and Hyatt (2000) and Sramova (2017) reported that mass media, parents,

siblings, peers, close relatives, school and shopping malls/stores are the main sources of consumer socialization.

Academic pressure: Luo et al. (2020) described academic pressure as the experience of stress, anxiety, discomfort and mental or emotional strain in the process of learning, generated by the pressures from educational institutions, family and society. Expectations of parents and teachers from their off-spring and students (respectively) also result in academic pressure (Celik, 2019). Students spend a large proportion of their day in school or pursuing school-related activities. While the primary purpose of school is academic development of students, its affects on children and adolescents are far broader, encompassing their physical and mental health, safety, civic engagement, and social development (Marin and Brown, 2008). Jones et al. (1992, 1996) reported that, academic pressures can produce levels of stress for certain students that can have negative effects on their mental health. Sullivan (2003) reported that, academic pressure (competitiveness) is one of the common stressors challenging pre-teens and teens. This stress may lead to depression, eating disorders, anxiety, teen alcohol and drug use and even suicide. Steare et al. (2023) have also described that academic pressure functions as a potential contributor in various mental health issues.

The 'educational stressors hypothesis' states that modern society gives greater importance to education, which provides a route to school related stress and various mental health problems (West and Sweeting, 2003). The increasing academic pressures to perform well in combination with norms based testing contribute to negative impact on health (Karvonen et al., 2005) and reduced academic self efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 1999 and McKay et al., 2014). Scholastic burden has a significant impact not only on the physical and mental health

of adolescents, but it also affects the relationships with family members, and the perception of happiness (Sun et al, 2011; Zhang et al., 2016 & Jiang et al., 2022). This burden of education makes the students vulnerable toward anxiety, and feelings of fear, inferiority and rejection, ultimately leading to various psychological problems, such as: aggression, hyperactivity and in some cases engagement in criminal behavior (McEvoy and Welker, 2000).

Dynamics of media and internet: In recent times, the influence of media on society has expanded exponentially. The internet has provided a giant leap forward in the accessibility of media and the ability of people to actively engage in media. Entertainment media has literally leaped off the big screen and out of the television producers' hands into video games, YouTube, and applications for mobile phones, to name a few (Sanson et al., 2013). Villani (2001) reported that, the primary effects of media exposure on children and adolescents are increased violent and aggressive behavior, increased high-risk behaviors, including alcohol and tobacco use and accelerated onset of sexual activity.

Ramdhonee (2012) documented that, a large amount of youth spends time on the internet. Internet acts as a mechanism for information dissemination, social interaction and entertainment. It has healthy and unhealthy consequences. The unhealthy aspect being so harmful, that the American Psychological Association has formally recognised 'the internet addiction disorder.' It was reported that the exposure to violence (learning of aggressive behaviour and desensitization), uncensored material and pornography, and negative behaviours of eating disorders (pro-anorexia, pro-bulimia and high risks of obesity) have resulted in decreased play or physical activities among children and adolescents. This has increased their risk for heart attacks, stroke and diabetes, deficits in social relations and

addiction. The popularity of computers and internet has exposed adolescents to limitless information, some of it is violent, explicit and age- inappropriate. Studies show that exposure to pornography, violent video games and gory images have deep psychological effects on children and teens, affecting their cognitive and psychosocial development (Rice & Dolgin, 2002).

Parental peer pressure and stress: Crawford (2010) documented that peer pressure is unavoidable, all-consuming and undeniable. Parents too have moments of wanting to fit in, battling insecurities, yearning for positive feedback and looking to the peers for acceptance. The peers for parents include the other parents. Elkind (2007) while working with the parents of children, observed that parents engage in hyper-parenting (inadvertently over-scheduling the activities of child to achieve perfection for a successful future), and overprotection. Parents do things not because they believe in it, but, just because society and their peers prescribe it as the right thing to do. This kind of pressure is particularly strong when children are young i.e. during pre-schooling years and in elementary school. Parents of young and school age children evaluate imaginary audience of peers i.e. their counter-parts, colleagues etc. Financial strain, economic instability (APA, 2023; Quint et al., 2018), time demands (Sayer et al., 2004), children's health and safety (Kwon et al., 2022; Lindo et al., 2016), parental isolation/loneliness (OSG, 2023), use of technology and social media by the children (Auxier, 2020), children's future, and societal pressures (pressures by others in the society) (Ghaleiha, 2022) are some of the sources of parental stress that impact the mental health and well being of parents (OSG, 2024).

Miniature adults: Children are more vulnerable because they are still developing. They need more attention to their needs in a

special way (Ensign, 2005). The demand on today's children and adolescents is to be sophisticated, not immature and with the potential for achieving excellence. The lack of parental supervision and guidance requires teenagers to mature earlier and become competent, at a much earlier age. The blurring boundaries of the nuclear family, the impact of media and various other sources has given rise to this problem (Elkind, 1994). Parents alleviate their anxiety through their children by using various defence mechanisms or techniques, like: displacement, projection and many more (Elkind, 1984). Leung (2007) has also reported that, complicated family dynamics, academic pressure, and the hectic pace of daily life in the modern times add up to stress for children and adolescents, that forces younger ones to grow up fast.

Adultification refers to the process of assuming the thoughts, traits and responsibilities of an adult (Burton, 2007; Nebitt & Lombe 2010). Children are exposed to adult life perspectives before they are actually ready for it. For example: Any child taking on the roles of adults within the family as premature emotional/social support provider and engaging in care-giving duties that are beyond the usual norms of their age (Jurkovic, 1997). Foster et al. (2008) reported that such adultified individuals undergo high levels of stress and psychological difficulties when they grow up as a consequence of the responsibilities they had to take in their childhood or teenage.

Conclusion

Research has shown that childhood is undergoing notable transformation. Hurried child syndrome is one such condition which is a consequence of such change. Responsibility and emotional overload because of changing family structures, consideration of children as separate segment consumers by marketers, lack of

contact with nature, overindulgence in supervised play and electronic games, setting of unreal standards for children to achieve academic and overall success, exposure to media and internet, higher levels of pressures and stress experienced by parents and over-scheduling /hyper-parenting, are all examples of change that human population has undergone largely in the past four to five decades. An attempt was made in this brief review to bring together some of the main factors that cause hurried child syndrome, to understand the combined effect of these factors. This was done by keeping in view that the amalgamated effect of these factors is more harmful as compared to the separate effects. A mixed method research needs to be carried out in future on the factors (altogether) that give rise to this problematic condition among youngsters. This will clearly elucidate the synergistic effect of these factors on children, adolescents and adults.

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