

# "Z" is for STRESS

## The Culprit(s) Behind All-Time High Stress on Generation Z

BY JO GRANT LANGSTON

The alarm rings and the day begins for 15 million U.S. high school students — according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Their schedule may be similar to the following:

- Carpool;
- Band practice before school;
- Math test;
- Social time at lunch;
- Part-time job;
- Homework;

And preparing for tomorrow, because the alarm will ring again bringing a new day with it; while just beneath the surface, stress is building.

According to the American Psychological Association's report "Stress in America: Generation Z," released October 2018, this generation considers itself more stressed than adults, registering 5.3 on a 10-point scale — next to the adult score of 4.9. Sixty-three percent of this population cite families not having enough money as a major stressor. Other issues like immigration, sexual assault and mass shootings contribute as well.

Adolescents aren't immune to the potential strains of school, home and social circles either. Triggering stress may be the pressures of making early career decisions, standardized or high-stakes testing, and the balancing act between extracurricular activities and academics.

**MAKING CAREER DECISIONS** Sara Villanueva, PhD, contributing writer for "Psychology Today," said today's teenagers are expected to know what they want to do — where they want to go to school and in which field they want to work — earlier than ever before. She writes, "They (teenagers) are also expected to do well and are put on 'success' tracks even in elementary school. They have to do well, because it is assumed that all (children) will/must go to college. Not just that, but they must get into the best college if they want to succeed and be competitive in today's job market."

Amy Duncan,\* a mother of twin high school sophomores, Christina Duncan\* and Carter Duncan,\* felt the pressure of this early decision. "In the ninth grade, they chose a career path," she said. "Fortunately, they were pretty confident in what they wanted to do. However, I questioned how young teenagers, who don't even really know who they are, could make such a choice."



**HIGH-STAKES OR STANDARDIZED TESTING** The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam, adopted by the Texas Legislature in 2007, is the current standardized testing required for students. For high schoolers, this test covers four different subjects at multiple comprehension levels. Failing sections of the STAAR could keep a student from graduating or require intensive tutoring — the pressure is on to pass.

Retired teacher Kelly Roberts\* directly witnessed the effects of this stress on her students. In her 21-year career, testing preparations for students in pre-K through high school were a central focus of her lesson plans.

"I spent a good deal of my teaching time working with students readying them to take the standardized test," she said. "The implications of the test created enough stress for the students, but they had additional

*"It seems like children have more pressures to deal with than I ever did when I was a teenager. That realization becomes clear when your kids are in middle school and high school — my two teenage sons have stressors that I didn't at that age. Sure, the majority of youth are learning to cope and problem solve through adversity — but at what cost? Are they wading through the waters and coming out stronger and more capable than previous generations? I don't think I am the right person to answer that question, but maybe it's a good question to think about."*

Shawn Marie Parrott, LPC-S, senior mental health professional, TTUHSC F. Marie Hall Institute for Rural and Community Health



stress to deal with as many of them worked after school. Some had children and were working hard to make ends meet. Many were also preparing to take college entrance exams.”

Samuel Thompson, PhD, director of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Slaton Independent School District and a licensed specialist in school psychology, sees firsthand the negative reactions to high-stakes testing. “Younger students may use avoidance strategies, such as tantrums or running out of the test. Older students may elect to drop out of school. In extreme cases, students may want to self-harm. Many of my students come from economically disadvantaged homes, so the pressure of this test is yet another stressor on their lives. Some can handle the pressure and some cannot.”

Today’s STAAR test is a result of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act that supports standards-based educational reform, based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals could improve individual outcomes in education. For states to receive federal funding, they are required to develop assessments in basic skills and to give these assessments to all students at select grade levels. Roberts agrees with the concept, but not the instrument.

“I support efforts to keep teachers and programs accountable,” she said. “The problem is with the test and how we must prepare these students. These tests are a ‘one-size-fits all’ way to gauge educational progress, and our students may not fit in those boxes. Learning disabilities are not taken into consideration. Anxiety and fear of failure may play a part. As a teacher, I was dedicated to giving my students tools to develop positive self-esteem. Unfortunately for many, the stress of taking the test overwhelmed them.”

**EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES/ACADEMICS** Sawyer Ramsey\* is a high school senior with his sights on May 2019 graduation. As a student involved in athletics, choir and the National FFA Organization, Sawyer works on homework until 11 p.m. many nights.

“Some classes are just more difficult and require more work at home,” he said. “I have tennis practice and choir practice after school, so that takes a lot of my time.”

Sawyer’s mom, Bethany Ramsey,\* feels the stress herself and for him. “College is just around the corner, and we all feel a pressure for him to do well academically for his career. We want our kids to make decisions about their future, but sometimes (Sawyer) can’t really focus on that as he works so hard after school just to maintain his grades.”

Because of the competitive nature of their extracurricular activities, Sawyer and the Duncan twins find themselves balancing academics with band and choir competitions. For Sawyer, the goal is to earn a spot in the Texas Music Educators All-State Choir, and for Christina and Carter, its University Interscholastic League state competitions.

*\*Names have been changed.*

*“I’m also a parent and have two sons myself — one’s in college and one is in high school — and I am still plugged into the everyday life of my kids. Youth today are experiencing things that most people my age never faced as children, or if we did, it was much later in our development. They’re living in a world full of pressures we have never had to deal with until later in life, so there’s a fragility there; you couple that with less engaged parenting and you come up with a bad combination.”*

**Chris Smith, Brownfield ISD superintendent**

⇒ REALLY? ⇐

**MANAGING THE STRESS** Coping mechanisms exist to help teenagers and their parents navigate the road to adulthood. For Jack Martin,\* a 13-year-old middle schooler, and his mom, Beverly Martin,\* worrying about testing isn’t something they do.

“At home, we don’t put as much emphasis on the testing,” she said. “As parents, we aren’t worried, so we don’t pass that on to Jack. We take those test days as they come. We refuse to let the test and the stress of the test define us or him. We can look at his results and see what he missed and go from there. Texas has set an unrealistic bar for these (children), so we take it with a grain of salt.”

Carter also takes the stress of his day in stride, looking for ways to find joy in what he is doing. “If I enjoy what I’m doing, then it’s not work,” he said. “I enjoy playing trumpet, being outside and playing video games. It’s a balance.”

His twin, Christina, also uses music to help her keep her stress in check. Their mom enforces bedtime schedules and downtime away from phones as a way to help her twins succeed.

For students without support at home, other solutions are sought. The Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit with a focus to build, strengthen and empower advocacy networks for play to improve the lives of children, is working to decrease the stress associated with these types of tests. Studies from the alliance point to stomach issues, headaches and increased dropout rates, especially among poor and minority students, as major deterrents to the continued use of high-stakes testing.

They suggest several alternatives including testing based on performance that measures not only the ability to memorize facts, but would also measure original thinking, real-world problem-solving, perseverance and social responsibility.

“We want our students to have repeated opportunities to respond to learning,” Thompson said. “That isn’t the design of high-stakes testing. The students know the implications of not doing well, and for many, this pressure plus other environmental stressors, inhibits learning.” 