



Teen's Stress and Survival: A Report on the Risk and Stress of Growing Up in Pittsburgh's Inner City

INFORM

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Shana and Ms. Taylor: When Stress Comes to School

Ms. Taylor started teaching Advanced Placement English three years ago in an all-white, suburban school. This fall was her first semester in the city schools. She told the students in her mainstream class that she had the same high expectations for them as she had for her AP classes. "Everybody in this room can be a good writer. That doesn't mean it is easy, but that each of you has the ability to do it if you are willing to work. And I intend to help you to succeed."

Ms. Taylor has a problem she can't solve. It's Shana Purcell in her first period 10th-grade class. Shana is often late; at first when Ms. Taylor would ask what happened (in front of the class), Shana just tried to avoid the question. When she wasn't prepared for class, she would mumble she didn't know – like she didn't know why the teacher expected her to know. But Ms. Taylor didn't give up; she kept asking her to contribute, kept expecting her to do the reading and her homework. And Shana has started coming back with smart remarks like "who cares?" Now when she's late, she walks in already angry-looking – like any word will make her explode. Ms. Taylor wants to be a good teacher; she feels stressed out trying to cope with Shana, and upset with the bad atmosphere it creates in their class.

This Monday and Tuesday Shana missed class; when she walked in Wednesday and a girl made a remark about how wrinkly her clothes looked, Shana whirled around and pushed the girl over a chair. Shana nearly hit Ms. Taylor when she tried to step in. Ms. Taylor can't put it together. The things she knows how to do – to have high expectations, to help students learn, to pay attention to them – aren't working.

The Math Teacher's Perspective

So she starts asking around. The math teacher seems to have written Shana off and seems ready to write off Ms. Taylor, too: "You must think you are still teaching an AP class. Be realistic.

Learn to keep discipline and you might get through. That's all they want anyway – to get through the system." Shana often sleeps in his class.

The Typing Teacher's Perspective

Although the typing teacher has a big class, she knows who Shana is: "She's got these big mood swings. Last week she made some mistakes and seemed to just lose it, throwing her paper onto the floor and starting to cry. When I mentioned it to the school counselor, she talked about depression – where teenagers are depressed, tuned-out one day, and hyper or angry the next. Maybe it's a boyfriend or something. But what if she tells me it's something worse? I'd just feel awful then because there is nothing I can do. I am here to teach; I can't be a mother or shrink. So I told her she needed to go to the counselor's office."

A Former Teacher's Perspective

Mrs. Morris, who had Shana in 9th grade, seems, however, to remember a different girl – one who liked school, even though she seemed to be taking a lot of responsibility for her little brother Sam. Then last May, Shana's grandmother died. "The word on the street," according to Mrs. Morris, "is that Shana's mom is probably back on drugs. I gathered that Shana and Sam often stayed with their Grandmother around the 1st and 15th of each month when their Mom got her check, or when there was no food in the house. This fall someone said they saw her and Sam out on the porch late at night when their mom had visitors.

If you ask about her mother or if there is a problem at home, Shana gets angry and shuts you out. She says, "I can take care of it." I noticed that she has gained a lot of weight over the summer, and dropped her old friends to hang with a tough group on her street. I can't figure that out. Why won't she talk to me or ask for help?"

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The Community Literacy Center

A Collaboration of the Community House and the Center
for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon University

Levels of Shana's Mind by Rena Howard

The story, "Shana and Ms. Taylor: When Stress Comes to School," shows stress accumulating. But from a teenager's point of view, stress happens very fast. I wrote this play to show adults that critical events bombard teenagers, taking up their whole mind-track of thinking. When that comes to be, critical events start coming at the teenager faster and faster to make her have less and less time to sort out problems.

You have to keep in mind that this play is happening in a minute. Set your mind to think faster than you're reading. If you read the story really slowly and try to analyze each part, you'll miss the point. The point is that to a teenager, everything is really critical. When those critical points hit against each other, time just flies by. A teenager like Shana might try to focus her mind to figure out one problem, but it seems that the day just goes by so fast. She finds herself simply going through school, or sleeping, or crying. Because she's confused, she doesn't know how to handle stress.

The Story Behind the Story

(The room is dark. A light shines on Shana. She's holding her head and thinking. People are running across her mind. She's trying to catch them, but they're running too fast. Read this as fast as you can.)

Old Friends: Why don't you hang with us no more?

Shana: I - I can't tell you now.

New Friends: Come On. Let's go for a drink

Brother: I'm hungry. I'm hungry. Mama's not home.

Ms. Taylor: Shana, where is your homework? Why are you late?

Classmate: Your clothes are wrinkled! Ha ha ha.

Grandma: Honey, be strong. Take care of your little brother. Remember, I will always love you.

Shana's Mom: Take your little brother outside. Clean up this house! What did I say about botherin' me about money?

Mother's Visitor: *(Visitor is with Shana's mom, bothering her about money. Shana overhears the visitor threatening her mom.)* You know, you still owe me for that stuff I gave you last week

Children and Youth Services Person: *(Like the visitor; the CYS person is dogging Shana's mom, but Shana is the one who hears it)* Mrs. Purcell, we're coming to your home today to see your living conditions because we feel that your home is not fit for young children.

Commentary I

If this world were perfect, then Shana would have a chance to talk to everyone and tell them how she feels. I could imagine the conversation going like this:

Ending I:

She could figure out the situation in her head. *(People come back on the stage, and she answers them.)*

To Old Friends: I'm sorry. I can't be around you all. I'm not trying to be selfish or anything, but that is the way that it has to be until I get my life straightened out *(Shana's thinking: My new friends are the best thing for me right now: Because they have similar problems to my own, they reassure me that I am not the only person with troubles.)*

To New Friends: I don't want to fall into my Mom's trap because I see that every day. I don't want my brother to be all by himself:

To Mom: Mom, why are you doing this to me? I'm always sad. You embarrass me in front of everybody. The whole school knows about you taking drugs. And I take my anger out on everyone else but you, the person I should be taking my anger out on.

To Brother: Sam, hold on. I'm coming home now. Just hold on and stop crying.

To Grandma: Grandma, don't leave me. I can't handle this all by myself. Now with you gone, I don't have any place else to go.

To Classmate: So what if my clothes are wrinkled? They're my clothes.

To Ms. Taylor: I'm sorry, Ms. Taylor. It's not that I miss your class on purpose. It's just that I have other things to do. *(See Cara Fulton's Negative Plus a Negative ≠ a Positive.)*

To Visitor: Hands off my mom!

To CYS Person: *(Shana nudges mom and puts socks on Sam.)* Please don't take my little brother away. Just because we don't have a mansion on top of the hill, doesn't mean that this home isn't fit for my little brother.

Commentary II

But this world isn't perfect, so in Shana's mind the ordeal might feel like this:

Ending II

Old friends, New Friends, Brother, Mrs. Taylor, Classmate, Grandma, Shana's Mother, Mother's Visitor, CYS Person: AAAAAHHH!!!! *(Scream at Shana.)*

(Lights off.)

Shana: *(Screams back)* AAAAAHHH!!!! *(She falls to the ground, huddles up -screaming)*

Shana and Ms. Taylor, continued

Ms. Taylor now has three different versions (from the math teacher, the typing teacher, and the 9th-grade teacher) of why Shana is doing what she is doing. In one, Shana has low aspirations and an attitude toward school; in another, Shana has emotional problems; and in the last, Shana has a big problem at home and she is coping the best way she knows how – even if it is backfiring on her.

What Ms. Taylor doesn't have is the story from Shana's point of view. In the next few articles, CLC teen writers provide versions of that missing story, as well as elaborate adult perspectives, and suggest constructive options that might be available to students like Shana.

Negative Plus a Negative \neq Positive

by Carla Fulton

I recommend that teachers approach teenagers in a positive way. But the teenagers have to be the ones accomplishing the positive actions themselves. In this first scenario, Ms. Taylor keeps on using negative approaches to try to get something out of Shana. But her strategy isn't working. Shana is closing up more than opening up.

An Explication of a Negative Example

Shana has just walked into class. She has not even sat down yet, and Ms. Taylor has already started hassling her from across the room.

Ms. Taylor: Shana, you know that this is the third day you have been late. *(This comment is ok because it is a student's responsibility to get to class on time.)*

Shana: Yeh, so what is it to you? *(Shana is angry because she feels that Ms. Taylor is prying into her business.)*

Ms. Taylor: I am your teacher, so it is my concern, especially since you have missed so much work in my class. *(That is true, but she should have told her privately rather than from across the room.)*

Shana: *(Sarcastically)* Well, Ms. Taylor, I am so sorry. *(Saying that sarcastically, Shana is signifying that Ms. Taylor is putting her nose where it doesn't belong. Shana's inner thoughts: How does she know what is going in my life?! She has no idea what I go through day to day! And she is lucky that I even apologized!)*

Ms. Taylor: Well, you should be, because there is really no reason for you to be late to my class. *(Once the words slip out, Ms. Taylor worries: Was that a mistake?)*

Shana chooses to go to her seat and not to respond because she feels that it is not worth the argument. She'll lose anyway.

Ms. Taylor: *(Angrily)* I think that you should start to get your act together. *(The teacher thinks Shana won the argument by staying silent. Ms. Taylor's ego starts to overcome her, so she gets angry.)*

My Commentary:

At this point, Shana is a nut that's practically sealed shut because of trying to deal with her mother. Ms. Taylor walks into a difficult

situation. But she only makes it worse by not thinking of any positive strategies to get to Shana.

An Explication of a Positive Scenario

Shana has just walked into class. She has not even sat down yet

Ms. Taylor: Good morning, Shana. How are you?

Shana: *(A little shocked, thinking, "Why is she talking to me?")* Hi, I'm doin' fine..

Ms. Taylor: *(After giving Shana time to get settled in.)* Shana, could you come up to my desk for a minute? *(Once Shana is standing in front of her desk)* You know that you've been missing some class work. So I've put it all together in this folder. By next Wednesday, please bring it in, and you'll get full credit for it. *(By handing Shana work to do in a week's time, Ms. Taylor is communicating, "I know you have some problems. But you're a good student, a strong young lady: I know you can do it.")*

Shana: Do you actually expect me to do all of this? This is a little bit too much. I missed a whole week. *(Shana is thinking: How can I make this up? I have to make dinner for Sam (her little brother). I have to babysit. I don't have any quiet place to do my homework. Mom's always having men over, and that's never quiet. I wish my Grandma were still alive because then I'd be able to go over there and she'd be able to help me.)*

This is a graph of Shana's schedule:

6:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

School

3:00 - 3:30 p.m.

Pick up brother. (She has to do this right after school to save money on daycare.)

3:30 - 4:00 p.m.

Get snack for Sam

4:00 - 4:30 p.m.

Every afternoon, start a load of laundry (a daily habit from when Sam was a baby).

4:30 - 5:00 p.m.

Finish laundry, run the sweeper.

5:00 - 6:00 p.m.

Make dinner for herself, Sam, and their mom if she's around.

6:00 - 6:30 p.m.

Bathe Sam

6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

Get Sam to sleep (which takes forever). Lay out his clothes for tomorrow and hers.

8:00 - 10:00 p.m.

Go out with new friends to be out of the house while Mom's visitors are over.

10:00 p.m.

Get back home to go to bed.



Writers Cara Fulton, Rena Howard and Michael Dean.

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Negative Plus a Negative, continued

This table shows that Shana's time is mostly consumed of taking care of someone else besides herself. The next day:

Ms. Taylor: Ok, Shana, this is it I'm sorry I can't offer you anything more. So I either see your work on Wednesday, or I don't *(She knows better than to get angry.)*

Shana: Ms. Taylor, you don't understand. It's not that I don't want to do this work I just do not have time to deal with it. *(Shana is opening up here, telling Ms. Taylor she wants to go somewhere in life. But because of the situations in her life, she has a difficult time actually achieving her goals.)*

Ms. Taylor: *(Picking up Shana's message, acknowledging that Shana is not that hard-core girl she thought she had become.)* Well, Shana, can you think of any ideas for getting it done? When you get some ideas, come talk to me. Maybe we can figure something out. *(Here, the situation takes a new direction. Instead of one person controlling the issue, people are working together, asking Shana to work within herself rather than make up excuses.)*

Shana: *(She's confused. Actually opening up to a teacher is frightening for her.)* I don't know, Ms. Taylor. *(Puts the folder of work on Ms. Taylor's desk)*

Ms. Taylor doesn't really want to know Shana's family problems. But she wants to know what's going on inside of Shana. Shana can still make use of her time, even though she's having problems at home. Later that afternoon, Shana picks up her 4-year-old brother from daycare, and starts thinking about his future, as well as her own.

Shana: What do you want to be when you grow up, Sam? You know, we're getting older. We have to start doing a little bit more for each other.

Sam: Well, can I help you with the dishes?

Shana: Dishes are one thing. But I need quiet time in the afternoon to do some school work. I can buy you some coloring books, and we could get some books from the library. And if you cannot do that, then I'm going to have to make you take a nap, although I hate to do it.

Shana's revised schedule:

6:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. School
3:00 - 3:30 p.m. Pick up Sam.
3:30 - 4:00 p.m. Get snack for Sam
4:00 - 4:30 p.m. Time for homework.
4:30 - 5:00 p.m. Time for homework.

Before, Shana felt she always had to be talking to Sam to give him back the attention he was missing from his mom. But she realizes now that they both have to take a step in the process of growing up. While Shana takes an hour out each day to do her work, Sam is also learning

to do some things on his own. In addition, Shana decides that since housecleaning isn't as important to her as it is to her Mom (who wants the house clean for her visitors), she'll wait until the weekend to clean.

Next day at school:

Shana: *(Goes to Ms. Taylor's room)* May I have that packet you made for me?

(Ms. Taylor hands her the folder.)

My Commentary

I think that through the negative and positive scenarios, you could see a big difference between Ms. Taylor's and Shana's attitudes. You could also see the process that Shana took within herself: Ms. Taylor didn't push it on her, but she did help her get to the point where Shana started to think not only of herself, but also her brother's future. If she can get herself together at home, she can do better at school. She realizes that she has to help her brother grow up, as well. Ms. Taylor is actually giving Shana some real responsibility by giving her a chance to do her work. Whether Shana does it or not, is her choice. But at least Ms. Taylor gave her a chance.



Writer Cara Fulton with mentor Elenore Long.