

Under pressure – #cmhw17

School is currently causing my child stress and anxiety.

There. I said it.

It pains me to lay it out so bare, and so dramatically, but the pain of writing it down is nothing in comparison to seeing your child crying and in pieces over the stress of school.

How old is my son? 15? Nearing GCSE age?

No. He is 8. At 8 years old, he is already feeling the pressures and strains of school life and it is having an impact on him at home, as well as at school. It's clear to see how much he is worrying on a daily basis. Nerves about going to school, crying and hitting himself on the head when he gets something wrong, calling himself stupid, frustration issues and just generally panicking about things that an 8 year old shouldn't even have to be worrying about in my eyes.

I don't think it is too overdramatic to conclude that school his having an impact on my child's mental health, and that can't be right, can it?

This week is [Children's Mental Health week](#). I have read a few articles about school stress and it's impact on children and, sadly, they really resonated with me.

Every day at the moment I see the emotional pain etched on Luke's face as he comes out of school. I'll say it again, he is only 8. Why on earth is this happening?!

Government targets and guidelines have taken over our teachers lives as well as our children's to the point that it is breaking both parties. Teachers cannot cope with the relentless targets, meeting of statistics and requirements and

box ticking, and the children can't cope with the pressure of having to meet these idealised the targets either. I know people myself, highly educated, talented people, who are teachers. They currently cannot see a way forwards, nor a future for themselves, in teaching anymore. Does that in itself not ring alarm bells with the powers that be? How can the children be happy when the teachers are unhappy?

Don't get me wrong, this isn't a dig at my sons school or teacher, I truly appreciate the work they do and the stresses they are under. I have seen the hours they put in, the backlash they get from parents of pupils when an objection has been made regarding something they have said or done. It's a thankless job, and one that is getting tougher. But, all of that put aside, something is going very wrong somewhere when my normally happy 8 year old is coming home and crying about how bad school was.

"We got shouted at a lot today".

"I got my times tables wrong today".

"People weren't listening in class today and it made our teacher cross with everyone".

"I didn't get all my spellings right today".

"I got told off for not asking for help with something but I have also been told not to ask for help straight away so I can challenge myself. I'm confused mummy. What should I have done?"

These are just a few of the things my son has said to me this week as he comes out of school.

Little, often seemingly insignificant, things that happen to a child during the day but they can all mount up and fast become an all consuming blanket of doom where a child is concerned.

Luke thrives on praise. He isn't very confident, he is full of

self doubt and is very sensitive. This means anything that is said to him, even flippantly, is stored in that little brain box of his for a very long time. He does not forget words. This means it is particularly difficult for him to get past what has been said and see anything else other than that. For example;

“Come on Luke! You can do this 8 times table no trouble. Let’s do it slowly together first,” I say.

“I can’t do it mummy. I’m stupid and I always get them wrong and I got them wrong again at school today” comes the reply.

It’s a constant cycle of self doubt.

Previous teachers have picked up on his personality very quickly and tailored his learning accordingly. Despite having a class of 30 children, the teachers have managed to do this and Luke has ended each school year meeting his end of year targets. This year however, I fear this won’t be the case. All of a sudden, Luke is going backwards. His times tables are apparently getting worse, his spelling is getting worse and he is not on target for where he needs to be. We have had to explain this to him because I was told by his teacher, in no uncertain terms, that Luke must know up to his 12 times table by the end of the year. And that’s that.

That is the marker of a person in year 4 of primary school.

You must know all your times tables up until 12 times otherwise you have failed.

It doesn’t matter that they are caring, thoughtful, sensitive, creative, eager to please and participating. If those targets aren’t met, those boxes aren’t ticked, they have essentially

failed to meet the standard for that year. And, in my eyes,
that is so wrong.

I appreciate children do need targets, but why do we have to pigeon hole them all into the same box? They all learn at different speeds and in different ways so why has it become acceptable for the success of a child to be pinned on these sometimes unobtainable milestones? We don't force children to walk do we? We let them get there in their own time, and yet, we are forcing them to conform to a government target because that is what we are told to do. Regardless of the child's wellbeing in the meantime in order to meet that target.

Because of Luke knowing he needs to meet this target by the end of the year, and because he was already struggling to get certain times tables to stick in his head despite our best efforts at home, he has become really stressed about it. He can't even do a times tables practice session with me now without panicking and crumbling under his self inflicted pressure. I can praise, stay calm, reassure, do all those things, but because he fully understands the pressure he is under from school and his teacher to obtain the results they desire, he is becoming a nervous wreck.

I know he knows the times tables, and he can do them when he isn't under a 10 second time constraint like in class, but as soon as that time pressure is put back there, he's lost. Lost in an abyss of frustration and panic.

I have pretty much been told I need to do more at home with him. I need to make things better. In-between getting home from school, going to after school clubs, looking after his other two brothers and doing homework with the middle one, making dinner, getting them bathed, getting them into bed at a decent time, all single handedly because my husband doesn't get in from work until late, I need to try harder. The pressure on me as a mum is also immense.

I won't lie, I crumbled last week.

After a meeting with Luke's teacher where I came out feeling like I had failed him as a mum and it was all my fault that he wasn't where he needed to be academically, I cried. I cried because I was overwhelmed. I cried because I could see Luke looked disappointed in himself. I cried because I was at a loss as to what else I can do to help him when we already do extra work at home. Clearly what I am doing still isn't enough, and that hit me like an out of control freight train.

What. I. Am. Doing. Isn't. Enough.

The self doubt and panic baton was passed onto me and it culminated in me getting angry at Luke about it all when, in actual fact, it's not his fault at all. Once I had reflected on it, I was angry with myself that I had snapped at him. He is trying his best, he really is, so I can understand how crushing it is to him to hear that despite his best efforts, he still isn't doing enough. He was feeling that same self doubt and panic as I was at that very moment, and then we ended up crying together. An 8 year old and his mum, sobbing over times tables. Yep, that is what life has become.

Maths didn't click with me as a child either. English, no problem. Maths, an eternal struggle so I can totally appreciate the feeling of wanting to chew your own ear off when you just 'don't get it'. We help as much as we can but sometimes these things just take time to click, but due to meeting these targets, time is not something we have.

Since that blip last week, we have started attacking his study at home in a different way. We have downloaded apps, a friend gave us a times table music CD, he has a target board on the fridge which he ticks off each day and we are challenging him to be more self motivated. It seems to be working at the moment but it has only been a week, and I am worried that if this doesn't work then we will be back to square one again.

We will take it a day at a time.

Those carefree childhood days I remember as a kid don't seem to be quite the same anymore, even if I remove my rose tinted glasses. I don't recall the pressure in the same way. I don't recall the fear of failure either. It really saddens me to think that Luke's 'carefree years' are already beyond him. He quite often says, "I wish I was back in Reception. It was fun then". How sad is that?! That he already feels like he has already had his best years when there are still (hopefully) so many more to come?

From the outside looking in, I can see that something is fundamentally wrong with our education system.

Something really needs to change.

A child's mental health and wellbeing is more important than targets and box ticking.

Isn't it?

All we seem to do is go on in a never ending cycle, even from a young age. Routine, work, stress, fear of failure, pressure.

Where did we lose sight of living and enjoying childhood, letting our kids be kids?

I think it's time to claim it back.

Songs always help me through times in my life. This one sums up 'life' and how I am feeling perfectly.

Just listen. Eyes closed. Ears and heart open.