

Stress in Children: Tips for Parents

Everyone is affected by stress and reacts to it in different ways. Stress is a way that our body responds to the demands made upon us by the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of those demands. We all experience both "good stress" and "bad stress." Good stress is that optimal amount of stress that results in our feeling energized and motivated to do our best work. Good stress encourages us to develop effective coping strategies to deal with our challenges, which ultimately contributes to our resilience. Bad stress occurs when our coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by the stress and we do not function at our best. It is important to note that the same event can affect children and adults in very individual ways—one person may see a carnival ride as thrilling and another may see it as a major stressor. Stress can become distress when we are unable to cope or when we believe that we do not have the ability to meet the challenge. The solution is to adapt, change, and find methods to turn that bad stress into good stress.

Causes of Stress

- At School. Stress can come from an unstructured classroom, unclear or unreasonable expectations, or fear of failure.
- At Home. Stress can occur through a lack of family routines, over-scheduling, prolonged or serious illness, poor nutrition, change in the family situation, family strife or abuse, or unclear or unreasonable expectations.
- Peer Related. Stress can be a result of changing school buildings, having to deal with a bully, fitting in with the crowd, or moving to a new community.

Stress tends to be additive in nature and with children can result in inappropriate behaviors, academic difficulties, or health problems. Parents can usually look back over recent events and see the causes of the behavior through the building of stressful situations.

Symptoms of Stress in Children

- Irritability or unusual emotionality.
- Sleep difficulty or nightmares.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Drop in grades or other functioning.
- Toileting or eating concerns.
- Headaches or stomachaches.
- Unexplained fears or increased anxiety (that also can take the form of clinging).
- Regression to earlier developmental levels.
- Isolation from family activities or peer relationships.
- Drug or alcohol experimentation.

Factors That Help Prevent Stress

- Positive problem solving and coping skills.
- Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults.
- Clear expectations.
- Permission and ability to learn from mistakes.
- Developing competencies (academic, social, extracurricular, and life skills).
- Consistent, positive discipline.
- Ability to express feelings appropriately.
- Feeling physically and emotionally safe.
- Good nutrition and exercise.
- Time to relax or do recreational activities.

How Parents Can Help

- Be aware of your child's behaviors and emotions.
- Build trust with your child.
- Be available and open to talk with your child when they are ready.
- Encourage the expression of feelings.
- Teach and model good emotional responses.
- Encourage them to tell you if they feel overwhelmed.
- Encourage healthy and diverse friendships.
- Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.
- Teach your child to problem solve.
- Use encouragement and natural consequences when poor decisions are made.
- Help your child select appropriate extracurricular activities and limit over-scheduling.
- Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes.
- Help your child feel a part of decision-making when appropriate.
- Monitor television programs that could worry your child and pay attention to the use of computer games, movies, and the Internet.
- Make children aware of the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol before experimentation begins.
- Monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.
- Contact your child's teacher with any concerns and make them part of the team available to assist your child.
- Seek the assistance of a physician, school psychologist, or school counselor if stress continues to be a concern.

Adapted from: "Stress in Children: Strategies for Parents and Educators," Ellis P. Copeland, *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators*, NASP, 2004.

The full handout is available online at <http://www.nasponline.org/families>.

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