

Stress Management For Children

People of all ages experience stress, and in small quantities, stress is good. It motivates the adjustments that translate into personal growth. Children are all about experience and growth. They are into everything and are always underfoot. To children, the world is a safe place because you are there every day taking care of them. Yes, they seem like rubber balls, able to bounce back from anything, and for the most part they do because they know you are watching out for them. They also learn to respond to stress by what they have seen and experienced in the past.

Many of the problems children experience may seem insignificant to adults, but since they have little prior experience, those problems are stressful to them. Some stress is caused by positive changes like starting school, holidays, or parties; and some can be due to negative changes such as the death of a loved one. Pain, injury, illness, and loss are major stressors for a child. Most importantly, parental stress is major stressor for a child. Although you may not be talking much about your impending divorce or job loss or move, your child is sensitive to the tension and picks up a lot of fragmented talk and body language.

Children don't recognize stress. They just know they feel lousy. Most of them will express it in exaggerated behaviors: more crying, more clinging, more tummy aches, more fighting, etc. Severe stress will be expressed in unusual behaviors such as bedwetting, stuttering, headaches, decreased appetite, and nightmares. All childhood stress should be taken seriously. Ongoing stress can affect physical and psychological growth. Your child's primary relief from stress is you. Your reassuring presence is essential. Your modeling of stress managing behaviors will help your child do their part in managing the changes in their lives.

What Parents Can Do

- Provide a safe, secure, familiar, happy home.
- Offer nourishing foods at most meal times and snack time and eat them yourself.
- Ensure that your child gets at least eight hours of sleep nightly.
- Provide clean, comfortable clothing and bedding.
- Encourage physical activity.
- Provide discipline, not punishment.
- Be selective in the television programs your child watches. Sometimes even the news can be upsetting to a child. A large number of children were very frightened over the television coverage of events September 11, 2001.
- Spend calm, relaxed time with your children as often as possible.
- Let your child know it is okay to feel angry, scared, lonely, or anxious.
- Keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes such as changes in jobs or moving. Let them know way ahead of time about doctor or dentist appointments.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and listen to your child without being critical.
- Model the behaviors you want to see in your child.
- If your life is stressful, so is your child's. If you see signs of overwhelming stress in your child, take your child to a doctor or counselor for evaluation.



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What Children Can Do

- Name the feeling you are having and share that feeling with a parent. If it is hard to talk about, draw a picture of it and share that. If you can't talk to a parent, find another adult who will listen.
- Try to relax. Listen to calm music or take a warm bath. Close your eyes and take slow deep breaths. Find a favorite stuff toy and cuddle it.
- Turn off the television and go outside and play, if possible. If not, find a toy or game and share it with a friend or brother or sister. Physical activity reduces stressful feelings.
- Sing a favorite song and dance to it. If you have a musical instrument, play along.
- Find something to laugh about. Remember a silly story or joke or go read a favorite book that makes you laugh.
- Look around to see if someone is feeling worse than you do. Go do something nice for them. They will feel better and so will you.



For more information on childhood stress, please visit:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html>

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/stress_coping.html