



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Is This Stress? What Can I Do?

The complexity of modern living has changed our romantic picture of childhood has a carefree, happy time. We know now that childhood can also be a time of stress and anxiety. Hopefully, the stresses can be balanced by periods of nonchalance and relaxation. This will not happen by chance. Parents need to help children deal with pressures of daily living and restore some equilibrium.

Causes of Childhood Stress

A child may experience anxiety when she shifts from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar. A situation that offers a challenge over which a child feels she has no control will produce stress for that child. Major life changes—the passage from early childhood to school age, the birth of a sibling, a divorce in the family, moving to a new neighborhood—are all stressful circumstances. Other stress-producing situations may not be so obvious to a parent—a change in nursery school class membership, an admonishment from the piano teacher, or the death of a classmate's uncle. Parental expectations to excel and peer expectations to be popular and "fit in" (often contradictory to one another) are far more complicated causes of stress for children.

What Can Parents Do to Help Children Manage Stress?

Legitimate pressures of life cannot be avoided. There are ways, however, that parents can help children meet and master the challenges that face them. Give lots of attention and physical affection to your child when he is an infant. Research on stress-resistant children shows that babies who get plenty of attention in infancy develop the security and self-confidence necessary to overcome adversity later. Touching your baby is one of the most important things you can do for his psychological health.

Capture every opportunity to build your child's self-esteem and competence. Research shows that resilient children get opportunities to feel the satisfaction of accomplishment. Provide your toddler or preschooler with protected freedom in which she can struggle to achieve success and test her sense of competence. The satisfaction a child feels carrying out an activity competently does not require some else's approval. Parents can help children find things that give them personal pleasure. Parents should also be willing to lower their expectations - focus on the satisfaction an activity gives the child, not on performance! If your child is not terribly good at sports, suggest a substitute activity like painting or story writing.

Be available to listen to your child's account of the day's experiences. Find out how he felt about the day as well as what he accomplished. Be mindful that beyond the workload of the school day, each day's tasks are associated with intense pressure to excel. School is an environment of unrelenting scrutiny, and children constantly feel the need to prove their competence. Monitor how your child is coping with stress.

Show your child that you see her as an asset and vital part of the family. Find something for her to accomplish that she knows you value. Help your child develop a range of resources—spiritual, social, and physical. Encourage him to build buffers against stress by developing talents and interests and by creating a network of friends. Children who have relatives and friends who care about them are better able to overcome difficulty than those who do not.

There are self-protective responses that you can each a child to use to reduce anxiety. Anticipation is such a response. If you are moving to a new neighborhood, talk with your child and steer his thinking to the possibilities such as the new playground across the street or the rope swing you will hang in the backyard elm. Open communication and problem solving is another way for



children to discover a self-protective response. Encourage your daughter to talk with you if she is having trouble with a friend or perhaps with her soccer coach. After you have discussed what is causing the stress, you may be able to suggest a substitution of activity or some ways to cope with the situation.

Evaluate your child's schedule of activities on a regular basis. Now that he is trying to master subtraction skills, he may need more quiet evening time. Maybe for the coming term he will need to cut down on extracurricular activities. Give him the chance to choose how time will be spent. Often the profusion of activities has less to do with a child's motivation than with a parent's idea of how to spend leisure time.

Aches and Pains as Symptoms of Stress

Children and teens complain of headaches and stomach aches more than any other pains. Finding the cause of these pains is difficult; a parent usually only has the child's description to go on unless fever, rash, diarrhea, or vomiting accompany these aches. Although headaches and stomach aches can be related to medical problems such as ear infections and flu, their most common cause is stress. Although pains can arise any time, watch for a pattern. Often children complain about not feeling well just prior to going to school, sports practice, dental appointments, or visits with noncustodial parents.

It is important to remember that the absence of an infection or injury does not mean the complaint is not real. Stress can cause actual pain anywhere in the body through changes in muscle tension, body chemicals, hormones, or blood flow. Headaches and stomach aches caused by stress will not usually disappear by themselves and may worsen if ignored. An age-appropriate dose of acetaminophen given to a child with either a headache or a stomach ache will provide some relief. An ice pack may also help a headache. Sips of a cola drink that has been allowed to go flat may help a stomach ache.

As soon as possible, you should sit down with your child and find out what is going on. Share your concern that he is not feeling well, but avoid giving him the "third degree." You need not interrogate your child, but you can suggest the possibility that something other than a medical reason may be causing the discomfort. Encourage him to share his feelings with you. Together you may come up with suggestions to help ease the problem. Headaches or stomach aches that are caused by stress should clear up

within two or three weeks after changes have been made to reduce or eliminate the stress. If the symptoms persist, you may want to talk with your family doctor.

As parents, we all want to protect our children from pain, disappointment, and frustration. Long after the stress of Friday spelling tests is a distant memory, children will carry with them, for better or worse, their vision of their own competence. We can help sharpen this vision by giving our children the resources with which to face the hassles of everyday living.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

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