

While some stress is normal and sometimes healthy, children today seem to encounter many stressful life events at an earlier age. Stress is a life event or situation that causes imbalance in an individual's life. Often stress is caused by something beyond our control.

Some stress is normal. Daily and life challenges are normal and can be expected. For instance, many children will attend school and will have to go through many transitions. Some stressors are quite predictable – being afraid of the dark, peer pressure. Others are not as predictable. Disruptions for what is considered normal for the child cause problems with stress. Small amounts of stress, as experienced before a test or meeting new people are necessary to present challenges for greater learning.

Problems begin when ordinary stress becomes too much or distress. There are a variety of reasons for children to feel stress. Death, divorce, remarriage, moving, long illness, abuse, family or community violence, natural disaster, fear of failure and even cultural conflict may heighten stress.

Reactions to stress vary with the child's stage of development, ability to cope, the length of time the stressor continues, the intensity of the stress and the degree of support from family, friends and community.

Notice the following signs of children showing stress:

- Physical – headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, bedwetting.
- Emotional – fear, sadness, irritability, withdrawn.
- Behavioural – crying, nervous, temper tantrums, bullying, shyness, mood swings, changes in sleeping patterns

Signs of stress occur together but no one child shows all symptoms at once. In school, a stressed child may be easily distracted, have difficulty in following directions or completing assignments or even have trouble in concentrating.

Children react differently to stress. Some children have easy-going personalities, taking things in stride while others are easily upset and bothered by new situations. In most cases, children's personalities are a product of their environment.

Preschoolers and Stress

Typically, preschoolers lack self-control, have no sense of time, act independently, are curious, may wet the bed, have changes in eating habits, have difficulty with speech and or sleep and cannot tell adults how they are feeling.

Preschoolers under stress react differently. Some behaviours may include irritability, anxiety, uncontrollable crying, trembling with fright, eating or sleep problems. Toddlers

may regress to infant behaviours, feel angry and not understand their feeling, fear being alone. They may bite, be withdrawn or be sensitive to loud and sudden noises. Feelings of sadness or even anger may build up inside of them. They may become aggressive, have nightmares or be accident prone.

Elementary –age children and Stress

Typical elementary-age children can complain a lot when things do not go their way. They may become aggressive, question adults, try out new behaviours, complain about school, complain about teachers, have fears and nightmares and lose concentration. Reactions to stress may include withdrawals, feelings of being unloved, being distrustful, not attending to school related matters, to friends and having great difficulty in accurately naming their feelings. Under stress, they may worry about the future, complain of headaches, stomach aches, have trouble sleeping and have a loss of appetite.

Coping with Stress

Just as children's reactions to stress are different, so are their coping strategies. The following factors support children and create a safety net for them during stressful times:

- A healthy relationship with at least one parent or close adult.
- Well developed social skills.
- Ability to act independently.
- A sense of purpose and future.
- A sense of positive self- esteem and personal responsibility.
- Religious commitment
- Ability to focus attention.
- Special interests and hobbies.

Families can provide further protection by:

- Developing trust.
- Being supportive family and friends.
- Showing caring and warmth.
- Having high and clear expectations without being overly rigid.
- Providing ways for children to contribute to the family in meaningful ways.
- Building on family strengths.

Children who live in supportive environments and develop a range of coping strategies become more resilient.

Some Coping strategies to consider in dealing with children who show signs of stress:

- Notice them – observation skills are essential. Observe for more quarrels with playmates, poor concentration or bed wetting.
- Praise children – Encourage children and show that you care. Be positive.
- Acknowledge feelings – Let children know that it is okay to feel angry, alone, scared or lonely. Give children names for their feelings and words to express how they are feeling.
- Have children view the situation more positively – some stressors make the children feel ashamed. Shaming affects self- esteem.
- Structure activities for cooperation and not competition – this allows individuals to go at their own pace and increases the learning of social skills.
- Involve parents, family members and friends – they can read together.
- Host regular, safe talks – members of the family or classroom group who feel comfortable can share experiences, fears and feelings. Suggest solutions.

Children must learn to think through a problem. Some specific strategies include self-talk, writing about the problem and making a plan. Thinking positively and thinking up real solutions is important.

Adults can –

- Show how they can cope in a healthy way. Keep calm, control anger, think through a plan and share the plan with rest of the family.
- Be proactive. Plan plenty of playtime, inform children about changes and plan activities where children can play out their feelings.
- Develop thinking skills. Help children think through consequences of actions. Pose situations and think through actions. Ask open-ended questions about what the solutions to problems could include.
- Help children tell reality from fantasy. A child's behaviour for example, did not cause his parents' separation.
- As an adult, focus on the stressor. Model how thinking through options for dealing with difficult people, situations or problems can help you find a solution.
- Find individual talk time. Talk about stressful events and everyday events.
- Use stories and books. Stories can help children identify with the feelings of the characters and tap their own feelings to ease them out for discussion and to discuss coping strategies.
- Encourage children to act out coping skills. Playing provides another opportunity to bring feelings out for discussion.
- Give the child some degree of control. Children should be allowed to choose within the framework of what is expected. Allow them to make some manageable decisions, such as how to arrange their room, to voice their opinion in some family decisions, which activity to complete.

If we can foresee an event, we can often block it as a stressor. Ignoring problems, changing the subjects, not worrying about it or changing an action can be coping strategies.

- Identify what could cause stress and plan ways to avoid it or how to deal with it if it cannot be avoided.
- Encourage children to be proud of themselves in some way. Develop a special interest or skill that can be a source of pride and self-esteem.
- Use gentle humour or read a silly book to create laughter and reframe negative thoughts into positive opportunities.
- Offer personal space. Quiet space and alone time should be allowed.
- Teach relaxation and deep breathing techniques. Ask children to close their eyes and imagine a happy place.
- Teach conflict-resolution strategies. Teach children to think through alternative ways to solve problems.

As adults we can make sure that we do not add to children's stress by expecting them to act in adult ways. We can praise, be positive, seek positive solutions, help children name their feelings, teach fairness, help children learn to like themselves, be patient, teach honesty and give lots of love and encouragement, particularly during difficult time