



Helping Children Cope with Stress

Children, like adults, can suffer from stress. Unlike adults, however, they may not be able to understand what is happening, or to cope with the stress and its consequences. Parents and other caregivers can help children during those difficult times by building up the child's strengths, self-confidence and self-esteem.

Stress is what we experience when we interact with our environment. Stress is inevitable and even necessary, but stress can become distress and parents should be alert to the fact that their child may encounter situations with which he cannot cope.

Children may respond to stress in different ways, but they are as vulnerable to it as adults are, maybe even more so. Not recognizing stress in a child's life can lead to problems.

What is distressful depends on personal perception and varies from child to child. For instance, one child may not feel any stress if kept up a little late. Another child may find that to be very stressful, and distressing.

To determine what could be distressful to a child, you have to first consider that individual child's perceptions, needs, and resources. Is he afraid of the dark? If so, what does he need to help overcome that fear? If it is a night-light or a bedtime story from a parent, are those resources available? If not, that stress may lead the child being unable to deal with a distressing situation.

Young children are egocentric and tend to think they cause the events that cause them stress or distress. Children may think, for instance, that when parents argue they are somehow to blame, and the guilt adds to their distress.

In addition to their inexperience, children are dependent on adults for their safety and well being, and can't operate independently. They need adults to guide them through the rough spots.

Children often can't pinpoint what is bothering them because they don't have the language to explain. But parents should be observant of their child's behavior. If it seems out of the norm, that child may be suffering from an overload of distress and need help.

When children encounter newness, change, separation from or loss of loved ones, or other stressful situations, they may express their feelings through behavior rather than words. Stress may cause children to show different behaviors or different degrees of their normal behavior. Their reactions can be physical, such as stomachaches, sleeping and eating disturbances, nightmares, and an inability to relax or concentrate. The reactions can also be behavioral and include regressive behavior, tantrums, aggression, withdrawal, clinging, mood swings, or excessive risk-taking.

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Abrupt changes or excesses in behavior indicate distress and are ways of coping, of asking for protection and attention and comfort. An occasional tantrum is understandable, but if a formerly well-behaved child starts having frequent tantrums that child may be trying to tell you there is too much stress and distress in his life. Parents may need to provide additional support at such times.

The following techniques can be used to help children learn to cope with the stress that occurs in their lives:

- ◆ Try to understand your child's feelings, but don't assume you already know those feelings. Children are different from adults and react in different ways. Listen for questions and try answering some questions by asking, "What do you think?" Observe his play and fantasies, because they may provide clues.
- ◆ Accept and acknowledge your child's feelings. Let him know he has permission to feel and verbalize emotions. Reading stories about children in similar situations helps children find words for hard-to-express feelings.
- ◆ Give your child time and space to discharge tension through active play. Allow harmless expressions of anger, and also provide for quiet, relaxing times. A playful pillow fight followed by hugs or a backrub can help your child overcome a stressful day.
- ◆ Let your child have control over some parts of his life. Even simple choices like what to wear or what toy to take for a visit to grandma helps give the child a feeling of control, and teaches him how to make decisions.
- ◆ When possible, prepare your child for any event that may be particularly stressful and trying, such as a visit to the dentist or going to school for the first time. Discuss what will happen and why it will happen in terms he can understand. Beware of too much anticipation, however. A child's sense of time is different from an adult's and if he has to look forward to something for a long time it will create stress. Remember, too, to provide information appropriate to your child's age. Too much information, such as the specific techniques of dentistry, may be as frightening as having no information at all.
- ◆ Most importantly, provide your child with plenty of love and support. Acknowledge his needs and show them he doesn't have to solve all his problems alone -- that you are there to help.

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