



Polk County

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June, 2004

## Young Families Newsletter

Dear Young Families:

Have you found yourself thinking, "If only I were a kid again without the stressors of adult responsibilities?" But when most of us recall our own childhood, we can also remember the fear of rejection, pressure to have the "right" friends, teasing, bullying and demands from parents and teachers that caused us plenty of mental anguish. Studies show that children experience stress and have symptoms much like those of adults. However, children have not yet acquired the means and skills to understand and manage their stress. Therefore, it is the responsibility of parents and caring adults to recognize symptoms of children in stress, reduce stress factors and then to assist children to deal with sources of stress.

**How does stress affect the body?** Some stress is normal and an expected part of life. This type of stress can cause us to have a greater desire to learn new things or to meet new challenges. On the other hand, when demands and expectations are out of balance with the ability to meet those demands, unhealthy stress responses occur. The normal body responses to stress include increased heart rate, faster breathing, and a tensing of muscles. If the body is in a state of prolonged stress, there is likely interference or damage to the physical, social and emotional development of the child.

What can we do as parents to help children create a sense of balance in their lives? The remainder of this letter offers insight and tools to assist you!

Sincerely,  
Gail Peavey, Family Living Agent

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### Possible Signs of Stress

It can be difficult to detect signs of stress in early childhood because it is a time of rapid change. Because change is stressful, it is expected that children experience some stress. However, the following behavior clues may signal that the child's life is becoming too overwhelming:

- withdrawal from other children/family members
- regression to earlier behaviors
- increased aggressive (bullying) behavior such as biting, kicking, hitting and arguing

- changes in sleeping, recurring nightmares, inability to fall asleep or stay asleep or sleeping excessively
- nervous habits such as biting fingernails, twisting or pulling hair, picking the nose or thumb sucking
- crying spells
- tattling
- tantrums
- increased fear of being left behind and excessive clinging
- numerous or unusual fears
- increased bed-wetting
- baby talk
- stomachaches or headaches or increased reports of feeling sick
- appetite loss or eating excessively
- grinding teeth
- moodiness and whining

Children express their feelings and stress differently. Some children internalize the stress and appear sad or depressed and may withdraw. Others express stress outwardly and start to misbehave. Children who have the "slow to warm up" temperament tend to withdraw; outgoing and intense children tend to act out. Because younger children do not have the capability or skills to describe their feelings, they show stress through behaviors.

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### **What to do when you detect signs of stress . . .**

Focusing on the "signal" behavior is useless. Scolding or chiding a child for hair twisting, picking the nose, or thumb sucking will not stop the behavior. When the unusual behavior is observed, comfort the child, remain close to the child, and care for the child.

Children will learn to manage and function while under stress, when they understand what they are feeling. Parents can help the child by giving names and descriptions to what the child is feeling and by letting the child know that it is OK to feel angry, alone, frightened or sad. *Example: Your child throws a fit when a new babysitter is introduced. Your response might include, "You feel a bit scared to have a new babysitter. Let's sit down with him and ask him what games, books, etc. he likes."* This shows more interest in what the child is feeling than in the behavior (tantrum or fit). The parent can follow this up with hugs and reassurance of their return. This builds the child's skill in coping with or managing stressful situations. The child knows it is OK to be scared in a new situation and he/she is led to find a solution of how to get to know a new person introduced into his/her life.

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**The following are strategies to reduce or manage stress:**

- **Set a good example** - The way children see adults around them handle stress will be the model used by the children. Provide honest and simple descriptions of stressful events that are happening around them. Children will often create an even more alarming explanation than what is actually happening. Avoid giving too much information.
- **Promote a positive environment** - Describe the positive things about your children and assure them that they are worthwhile persons. This builds independence and confidence in them to handle whatever comes up.
- **Encourage physical activities to vent tension** - Physical activity releases negative tension before pressures build to an explosive level.
- **Talk about upcoming events such as first day at school, parties, or the birth of a sibling.** Keep the talk simple. Giving TOO MUCH information can build the occasion to such a great level that the event becomes stressful. Balance it between "too hot" and "too cool" and make it "just right."
- **Practice positive self talk like the *Little Engine That Could*. "I think I can, I think I can."** Positive self talk illustrated in such stories reassures children that others have feelings of self-doubt that can be overcome by believing in oneself.
- **Use stories to encourage children to more easily express themselves.** Children can identify with characters in the story. Children can more easily express their feelings through the story characters without risking feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable. Parents can ask the child, "What do you think Tommy (story character) was most worried about?" The child can more easily express the worries when he is not asked directly about his own feeling.
- **Find others in your family and community to whom you and your family members can turn to for advice.** Studies have shown that children who are the most likely to bounce back after faced with stressful events have connections to adults outside of the immediate family.
- **Teach relaxation skills and exercises.** Show your children how to relax by imagining or remembering a favorite place or happy experience. Teach your children relaxation exercises.
- **Role-play situations that might be stressful.** Talk through the situation and practice approaches to the problem.
- **Give back rubs.** Gentle physical touch is a powerful stress reliever.
- **Model to your children that mistakes are OK.** Let children know you have made mistakes. Mistakes are for learning.
- **Eat healthful diets.** A healthy body is better able to handle stress.
- **Spend one-to-one time with your child.** Find an activity that you can do along with your child. This provides time to talk in a leisurely manner. Don't force your child to talk, but offer the opportunity.
- **Provide a spiritual base for your child.** The Search Institute studies identify involvement in a faith community as one of the 40 assets kids need to succeed. In times of stress, children can have contact with adults and peers who share similar values and views.
- **Avoid punitive methods of discipline.** Be clear about family rules and consequences. Tell your child what you expect and decide on a consequence that is directly related to the misbehavior. A spanking has nothing to do with not picking up the toys. If the toys are not picked up, a more appropriate consequence is not allowing the child to play with the toy the next day. Adjust the consequence to the age of the child.

- **Avoid over-scheduling the child.** Too many activities are stressful to both children and parents. Allow down time for unstructured play, reading books, day dreaming and conversation.
  - **Monitor television viewing.** The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests no more than 1 to 2 hours of television viewing per day. Avoid watching shows with topics that reinforce your child's fears or are not age appropriate for your child. Television sometimes frightens children by exposing them to things they cannot understand. Turn off the television when news broadcasts constantly replay scary scenes such as the scenes of war. Children who viewed the attacks on the Twin Towers from different video clips believed that there were more than two tall buildings that were attacked. Many children felt there were buildings going down in many different locations.
  - **Avoid being the "pushy" parent.** Once your child is involved in an activity be supportive, but do not set standards of accomplishment for your child. Allow the child to set his own dreams and goals.
  - **Take care of yourself.** Allow enough down time for yourself. If you are stressed, most likely your child will feel that stress.
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### Try These Relaxation Exercises:

The following exercises can help you relax when you are feeling up-tight and help you get rid of the uncomfortable feeling in your stomach. Pay attention to how your muscles feel when they are tight and when they are loose and relaxed.

#### "Who knows?" - An exercise for the shoulders.

- Stand up straight like a soldier with hands along your sides.
- Raise your shoulders to your ears. Hold it. (Say a long drawn out "Who".)
- Then let your shoulders drop. (Say "knows".)
- Repeat at least 5 times.

#### Deep Breathing - Slows both your body and quiets your mind.

- Get into a comfortable position. May lie flat on your back or sit comfortable with both feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes.
- Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy. Place one hand below your belly button.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose to a count of four. Fill the "balloon" with air.
- When the "balloon" is full, breathe out slowly to flatten the balloon. Use the count of four.
- Repeat 5 times.

#### Squeeze the Lemon

- Stand up straight like a soldier with hands along your sides with fingers pointing down.

- Pretend you have a lemon in each hand. (May use a soft squeeze ball.) Squeeze the "lemon" until you have every drop of juice out or until your ball is completely compressed and hold it tightly for a count of four.
  - Relax and drop the "lemon" or ball.
  - Repeat the above three steps and this time tighten your arms to squeeze your body and hold for a count of four. Relax and drop the "lemon" or ball.
  - This time repeat the above and also squeeze your legs together. Hold for a count of four.
  - Relax and drop the "lemon" or ball.
  - Shake out your hands, arms, and legs. Enjoy being relaxed.
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