

WHAT DOES STRESS LOOK LIKE?

It is often easy to overlook the signs and symptoms of stress in young children because they can be very similar to typical behaviors associated with normal growth and development. For example, many toddlers bite; biting behavior can be a part of normal development. On the other hand, biting can indicate the child is experiencing stress. The caregiver must look at the whole picture and take into consideration what are normal patterns of behavior for this child. Sudden changes in behavior that persist over time should cause red flags to go up, as they may be indicative of a child's stress reaction. While we still need to deal with the behavior, it is helpful to recognize when stress may be the root cause. Knowing this will help us take a two-pronged approach: reducing stress while contributing to stability by maintaining consistency with our rules.

Signs of stress in babies and toddlers include:

- Fussiness
- Poor appetite or uncontrollable eating
- Sleep disruptions
- Difficulty with toilet learning
- Difficulty adjusting to child care
- Clingy behavior; withdrawn
- Chronic problem with biting or hitting
- Highly distractible
- More tantrums than other children

Signs of stress in preschoolers and school-age children

- Fidgeting, wiggly, jittery, restless, wandering behavior
- Difficulty sitting still; often touching and disrupting other children
- Continual self-stimulation through thumb sucking, masturbating, rocking their bodies
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in toileting
- Unresponsive to friendly gestures
- Often crying
- Fearful and preoccupied with frightening images
- Regression to earlier stages of development

- May want to play with toys geared toward younger children
- Destructive, repetitive play
- Lash out and act aggressively toward other children and adults
- Proud of his/her aggression
- Withdraw and become passive
- Tantrums
- Sullen and defiant behavior when disciplined

Signs of stress in teens:

- Headaches, stomach aches, physical illness
- Laughing or crying for no reason
- Blaming everyone else for things that happen to them
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Edgy, defensive, argumentative, impatient, negative
- Drop in school grades
- Tired; difficulty sleeping
- Change in friendships and in activities
- School attendance problems
- Anxious, frustrated, worrying
- Change in appetite; change in eating patterns
- Depression

Again, as you look at the above lists, you will see many behaviors that are common for children in those age groups. Your role is to recognize when the behavior has gone beyond what you typically see and beyond what is typical for the particular child of concern.

What can help stressed children?

- ❑ Predictable and reliable adults. With young children, use pictures etc. to help them understand schedules.
- ❑ Personal space where they can be alone
- ❑ Food available at various times, not just meals.
- ❑ Cut down on distracting background noise

- ❑ Space and time for highly active play
- ❑ Physical activities
- ❑ Choices
- ❑ Soothing sensory experiences
- ❑ Toys , materials, and activities that are appropriate for younger children
- ❑ Keeping a regular routine
- ❑ Modeling stress management skills-tell them when you are doing something to cope with your own stress. In that way you are directly teaching them how to handle stress.
- ❑ Monitoring sleep and nutrition
- ❑ Attention and Encouragement
- ❑ Freedom to express emotions
- ❑ Acceptance of emotions
- ❑ Involving them in things that have enjoyed doing in the past
- ❑ Don't forget they are children, not adults.

