



Grandparents Can Help Grandchildren in Times of Stress

“Grandparents can be effective role models of how to cope with stress,” says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging. “They can reinforce the coping skills their grandchild learned from their parents.”

Children experience stress from many sources. Both positive and negative events contribute to stress, as stress is part of life. Children may experience stress as a result of changes that are common, such as starting school or day care, the birth of a new baby, illness, separation or divorce, change of parent’s job, moving to a new home, or a death in the family.

Other stresses are unusual and traumatic. Children may be homeless, live in fear from violence in their schools or neighborhoods, or be survivors of natural disasters. Childhood pregnancy, drugs, alcohol or abuse may be part of their lives.

Grandparents can look for behaviors that are not the norm for the child. Noticeable emotional, social, physical and intellectual changes may be a sign that their grandchild is under stress.

Emotionally, a child under stress may appear more fearful, sensitive, tense, aggressive, greedy, angry, restless or irritable. If a child does not know why he or she feels this way, stress could be a factor. Socially, a child under stress may be aggressive or withdrawn. Both of these symptoms can lead to feelings of isolation, which may increase stress levels.

Brintnall-Peterson recommends several ways for grandparents to help their grandchildren cope with stress:

- Remember to set realistic expectations for the child’s age.
- Contribute to your grandchild’s positive self-esteem by providing encouragement.
- Nurture and cherish your grandchild. Say, “I love you.” Give a hug. Accept him or her for who he or she is.

-- Recognize your grandchild's positive behavior by letting him or her know when he or she is "being good" or their behavior is acceptable.

-- When unacceptable behavior occurs, redirect your grandchild by helping him or her find acceptable ways to express negative feelings, like "When _____, I feel _____, because...."

--Take time to develop mutual respect and trust.

-- Listen to what your grandchild is saying by paying attention to body language. Take time to talk with your grandchild and listen carefully.

-- Share stories that provide examples of how you deal with stress and change. Also, remember that you model appropriate ways to deal with stress and that your grandchild is watching you.

-- Spend time with your grandchild. Make use of each opportunity to share time, heritage, thoughts and experiences. Plan for special times together.

-- Allow your grandchild to help you when appropriate. Remember to be patient, as it may take longer to complete a task with your grandchild helping you.

Grandparents can be an important source of support when their grandchildren's lives include stress. Taking time to listen and talk with grandchildren and showing them how you have learned to deal with stress in life can help them get through the difficult times and build coping skills for future challenges.

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