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# Parenting

the

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## Children and Stress

Yes, young children do experience stress. Sometimes a child's stress comes from physical causes (hunger, pain, being over-tired). Other times, stress comes from social causes such as separation from parent, a new sibling, divorce/remarriage of parents, family conflict, "hurrying" or family disorganization.

Temporary stress is not usually harmful, but continuing stress can be physically harmful. A "pile-up of stressors" is harder than a single large stressor. (For example: Most kids survive their parents' divorce reasonably well, despite it being difficult for them. Children who experience lasting harm tend to be those who had some other pre-existing problems going on at the time of the separation and divorce—a "pile-up" of problems.)

Surprisingly, "everyday hassles" (things that are daily bothers) may seem to be more stressful than a single large stress event.

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**As parents and caregivers, our job is two-fold:**

- ◇ **Reduce stress factors for our young children.**
  - ◇ **Assist children with coping strategies and healthy responses to unavoidable stress.**
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### Signs a Child is Stressed

Be alert to stress in your child's life. It is often difficult to recognize the signs of stress in early childhood, in part because children are changing so quickly. Also, young children do not have the

ability to describe how they feel. Often we have to look for clues in their behavior. Watch for these signs of stress in young children:

- changes in sleeping, recurring nightmares, inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, sleeping excessively
- changes in eating or bathroom habits
- nervous habits like biting fingernails, twisting strands of hair, picking the nose
- unusual or numerous fears
- increased irritability or anxiety
- increased aggression and anger
- excessive clinging
- regression to earlier behaviors
- increased fear of separation or abandonment
- increased crying
- withdrawal
- moodiness and whining
- feeling sick, stomachaches or headaches

How a stressful situation affects a child depends on the child's personality, developmental stage, and style of coping. The negative impact of stress is more profound for children who are "slow to warm up" or "difficult." Children's physical responses to stress is different in that they may be more intense and children are usually less able to hide their reactions.

### Emotional Reaction to Stress is Learned

Think for a moment of the pro-athletes you see on TV. When one of them is called for a foul, he whines at the umpire. Another player mutters angrily to himself. A third remains calm and intense. Each has developed a habitual pattern of

emotional response to this situation. It is a learned habit. The player who keeps himself calm and focused is using "emotional self-regulation." He may not be in control of the events, but he is in control of his response to those events.

Young children often react to stressful situations by crying and being upset in order to show their feelings or acting out by being aggressive or disruptive. As children get older, they use problem-solving strategies by asking questions about what happened or will happen.

### How Can Adults Respond to Children's Stress?

Parents and other caregivers can prevent and reduce stress for children in many ways.



- Help your child anticipate stressful events, such as a first haircut or the birth of a sibling. Talk about the upcoming event. Avoid "over-preparing" as that can prove to be even more stressful than the event itself. Encourage your child to ask questions.
- Create a "network" of social support for you and your family. Find others who you can turn to for advice, to watch your children, and to help you and your child.
- Help children identify a variety of coping and problem solving strategies (e.g., "ask for help if someone is teasing you," "tell them you don't like it," "walk away"). These strategies help children feel more effective in stressful situations.
- Practice positive self-talk skills (e.g., "I'll try. I think I can do this.") to help in promoting stress management.
- Provide a supportive environment where your child can play out or use art materials to express concerns.

- Other basic strategies include implementing sound positive discipline strategies, following consistent routines, enhancing cooperation, and providing time for children to safely disclose their concerns and stresses privately and in groups.

### Make Sure Not to Contribute to Children's Stress

Sometimes the adults who care for children create extra stress for them without meaning to. Keep your expectations reasonable and realistic. Allow plenty of time for your preschooler to play. Provide a variety of play and art materials for your child. Appropriate activities allow your child to make choices and allowing a child to make choices usually reduces stress for everyone.

Do not use television as a part of your daily schedule. Carefully select television programs that are not frightening or violent, and use television only rarely. Sometimes adults unintentionally frighten children by exposing them to things that they can't understand.

Monitor your own stress levels. Avoid passing your own stress on to your child. Make sure you allow enough time to take care of yourself so that you will be able to take better care of your child. Get enough rest and plenty of exercise. A healthy diet is also important in coping with stress.

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