

A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Cope with Stress

Stress is a normal and unavoidable part of life that affects everyone from children to the elderly. Even infants feel stress. After all, what could be more uncomfortable than a wet diaper! Stress can be positive or negative, depending on how the person is able to manage the situation. And what is stressful to one person may not be to another. Stress can lead to emotional, physical, social, and/or academic difficulties. So, here is some information to guide you, as a parent, in helping your child cope with stress.

Common Stressors:

Here are some common stressful events that occur during childhood.

- Beginning school - Separating from parents - Managing increased academic demands - Learning to interact with peers and making new friends - Dealing with peer pressure or bullies

And these are just the ones that most children encounter. Additional stressors may include:

- Taking on too many activities - Moving to a different neighborhood - Changing schools - Separation or divorce of parents - Illness or death of a family member or friend or even a pet - Community violence - World news such as natural disasters or war

Signs of Stress:

Recognizing when your child is feeling stressed is the first step in helping them to deal with it. Although everyone reacts differently to stress, the following symptoms are common warning signs.

- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much - Eating too much or too little - Headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints - Increased mood swings or tantrums - Excessive clinginess or crying - Peer difficulties such as bullying - Defiance - Difficulty concentrating - Regressive behaviors such as bed-wetting

Tips to Help Your Child Manage Stress:

1. First, since everyone reacts differently, become aware of how your child uniquely responds to and manages various situations.
2. Make sure that your child gets enough sleep, eats well, and stays active, as these are all protections against stress.
3. Be a positive role model for your children. If you respond to your own stress with anger, chances are they will too. If you talk through your feelings, they will follow suit.
4. Encourage your children to identify and express verbally their thoughts and feelings. Talk through possible coping strategies or alternative behaviors.
5. Establish concrete, immediate, and realistic consequences for behavior difficulties, explaining why the behavior was not appropriate.
6. Reward your child when they positively cope with a situation. Praise and hugs work perfectly. And even if they don't succeed, valiant attempts should be acknowledged. This will help to build their confidence and self-esteem.
7. Help your child to avoid stressful situations whenever it is realistic. For example, try not to over-schedule their time. Or help them prepare ahead of time for a stress-inducing situation such as a visit to the dentist.
8. Set realistic expectations for your children. Don't expect them to be perfect and be forgiving when they do make a mistake. And encourage them to do the same.
9. Help your child develop a supportive and positive peer group.
10. Encourage your child to find ways to calm down and relax such as taking a bath, breathing deeply, drinking a cup of warm milk, or playing with a pet.
11. Seek help if you feel that your child is not managing well. Addressing the difficulties as soon as possible will diminish the negative impact on social interactions, family relationships, and academic status.