

Young Children & Stress



Stress is a response to life experiences and can be negative, as well as, positive.

Adults and children experience stress, and although we cannot completely do away with it, it is possible to lessen its negative impact.

Unlike adults, children do not have enough life experience to know how to manage life's pressures. Parents need to recognize symptoms of stress in their children and work with them to reduce the strain before more serious issues develop.

Common signs of stress in young children

- Tummy aches
- Toileting accidents
- Running away
- Self-comforting behaviours (e.g. rocking)
- Sweaty palms
- Aggressive or defensive outburst
- Nervous behaviours (e.g. hair twirling/pulling/chewing/sucking and/or biting of skin/fingernails)
- Freezing up in social situations
- Separation anxiety



Common causes of stress in young children

- Parental demands
- Family problems (e.g. alcoholism, violence, or abuse)
- Arguments and fighting
- Being away from home
- Fear of wetting themselves
- Fear of new or unfamiliar situations
- Fear of teasing by parents and/or siblings
- Inconsistent, confusing, or severe punishment
- Fear of failure
- Discouragement of freely expressing ideas and opinions
- Parental separation and divorce
- Overanxious parents
- Mentally ill family member
- Severe or chronic physical illness of family member
- Death of family, friend, or pet
- Family financial problems

Good communication between parents and children is very important in order to learn about sources of stress. Listen carefully to your children without judging or lecturing, to show that their concerns are understood. By listening and clarifying, you can help children understand what is causing their stress and how to manage it.

Be alert to signs of stress in children and address these as soon as possible. Although parents cannot completely remove stress from their children's lives, they can help their children develop the necessary skills to manage it more effectively.

Stress management in children: what parents can do

- Encourage open communication at all times. Help children talk about feelings, and respond with understanding and support.
- Role model calm behaviour when you are feeling stressed.
- Discuss what solutions one might use in different stressful situations. This will allow them to brainstorm as well as learn new ways to cope.
- Show understanding of what has been said to you by repeating the information back.
- Never judge, or discount, children's thoughts or beliefs.
- Offer suggestions to problems and concerns; however, do not take it personally if children choose not to follow them.
- Build predictable routines into your day.

Also

It is important that children feel respected as they develop and grow. Children who have a positive self-image, strong values, and the security that comes from a loving home are able to deal more effectively with life's stresses.

- Allow children to make mistakes. Remember, everybody makes mistakes.
- Encourage children to explore and try things that develop new skills and confidence.
- Be encouraging, even if children are met with failure, as it is a natural part of learning.
- Set limits for acceptable behaviour while allowing for some freedom within those limits.
- Provide children with tasks that they can do in order to build self-confidence.
- Show children how you settle differences peacefully.
- Allow children to settle differences themselves, when they can.
- Offer children enthusiastic praise for their efforts.



Stress management in young children

- Anticipate stressful events such as the first day at kindergarten. Talk about who will be there, what will happen, and when you will be back.
- Provide activities where children can play out, or use art materials, to express their concerns.
- Read stories about stressful situations like starting school or child care.
- Give lots of cuddles and hugs.
- Help children identify a variety of coping strategies such as telling someone their teasing is not nice, or walking away.
- Dance, sing, etc.
- Play with play dough.
- Take deep breaths.
- Participate in fun physical activities (go for a walk, ride bikes, play at the park).
- Listen to music, or do any other activity that relaxes.

Suggested Reading

Sullivan, Karen. (2002) *Kids Under Pressure: How to Raise a Stress Free and Happy Child*. Piatkus.

Witkin, Georgia. (1999) *Kid Stress: What It Is, How It Feels, How to Help*. Viking Penguin.

Suggested Websites

www.kidshavestresstoo.org

www.investinkids.ca

www.sickkids.on.ca

www.cps.ca

www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Additional Resources

Children's Health Information Line

905-825-6000 ext. 7877

1-866-442-5866 ext. 7877

chintake@halton.ca

Association of Parent Support Groups in Ontario

1-800-488-5666

www.apsgo.ca

Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK)

905-634-2347

Crisis Line 905-878-9785

Ontario Early Years Centres

www.ontarioearlyyears.ca/oeyc/en/home.htm

Crisis Help Lines

Oakville Distress Centre (12pm-12am)

905-849-4541

Kids Help line (24hrs)

1-800-668-6868

Burlington Telecare Distress Line (24hrs)

905-681-1488

For more information, contact

Halton Region

905-825-6000

Toll free: 1-866-4HALTON (1-866-442-5866)

TTY: 905-827-9833

www.halton.ca



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