



Stress in Young Children

When stress is no longer manageable it is time to seek help

Not everyone can easily 'bounce back' from stress. Getting early support is key to helping adults and children thrive. Contact your Healthcare Provider or HaltonParents if you or your child is feeling overwhelmed and struggling to cope.

The HaltonParents team of public health nurses is here to help.

Call 311

Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

haltonparents@halton.ca

@HaltonParents

haltonparentsblog.ca

haltonparents

Learning to cope with stress is part of healthy child development

Early experiences shape how a young child responds and adapts to stress. Children are able to manage everyday stress when they are given the tools and a chance to practice. When we help young children learn positive ways to cope with everyday stress it becomes 'hardwired' in their brains, improving their health, behaviour and happiness as they grow into adults.

Promote children's well-being to protect them from stress

Create a safe, secure environment. Strong, caring relationships with adults helps children learn how to cope with everyday stress. Responding consistently and sensitively to a child's stress and showing them affection lets them know that they are valued and not alone.

Create healthy habits. Eating healthy, being active, limiting screen time and getting enough sleep can go a long way in helping your child feel calm, in control and good about themselves. Free play time can also be a great stress buster for kids as they burn off energy and get to be creative!

Have consistent and predictable daily routines (e.g. morning, meal, and bedtime routines). Routines help children to know what to expect, they also teach them important skills while promoting independence. Making family time a routine helps parents and children connect in positive ways, adding to a child's sense of security.

Not all stress is equal

Different types of stress can have either a positive or negative impact on a child's developing brain.

Positive stress, such as a child separating from their caregiver or starting their first day of school, can teach children problem solving and coping skills that are important for healthy development.

Tolerable stress is a more serious, temporary stressor, such as a loss of a loved one or a family pet. It can trigger the body's stress response system to a greater degree and can possibly negatively impact a child's developing brain.

Toxic stress is the result of long-lasting or reoccurring stressors. This can include; physical or emotional abuse, neglect, contact with a caregiver with a substance abuse issue or an untreated mental illness, household violence, living in poverty etc. Toxic stress can lead to damaging, long-lasting wear and tear on the body and brain, affecting learning and behaviour through adulthood. (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2012)



Learn what stresses your child

Young children are better able to learn, cooperate and get along with others when they are not stressed. Understanding what triggers stress in your child and reducing causes of stress is important for their healthy development. Causes of stress in young children are not always clear. Is your child:

- ❑ Overwhelmed by a noisy or visually busy environment?
- ❑ Anxious in new situations such as starting a new daycare or school?
- ❑ Having difficulty stopping one activity and starting another?
- ❑ Having difficulty getting along well with their peers, sharing or taking turns?
- ❑ Struggling with meeting their developmental milestones?
- ❑ Having difficulty adjusting to new routines or changes in routines?

Also think about yourself:

- ❑ Do you expect too much of yourself or your child?
- ❑ Do you feel overwhelmed and have difficulty coping?
- ❑ Do family routines such as morning or bedtime routines feel rushed?
- ❑ Do family members generally get along with one another or is there ongoing fighting and tension?



Understand how your child shows stress

Not all children experience or show their stress in the same way. Some children are more sensitive and reactive to stress than others. A young child may have difficulty in knowing or in finding the words to tell us they are stressed. To understand how a child experiences stress we need to look at their behaviour and read their cues. When your child is stressed do they:

- ❑ Have frequent temper tantrums?
- ❑ Become clingy, whine or seem anxious?
- ❑ Complain of tummy aches or headaches?
- ❑ Go back to earlier behaviours (e.g. wet the bed)?
- ❑ Have changes in their eating or sleeping patterns?
- ❑ Become aggressive (biting, kicking, yelling etc.)?
- ❑ Withdraw, become quiet?

Help your child to manage everyday stress

Label and acknowledge feelings. Feelings can be hard for young children to understand. Children have a limited number of words to describe a wide range of feelings. When you acknowledge and label your child's feelings they feel understood, and you strengthen your connection. Use everyday opportunities to help your child develop their emotional language e.g. 'I can see you are very mad that Paula took your doll'. Naming feelings gives your child another tool to express anger or frustration and might help them to keep their hands and feet to themselves.







Reduce stressors. Not all stress is avoidable such as starting daycare or school. Limiting stress in other parts of your child's life will make it easier for them to cope with normal everyday stressors. Simplify daily life and limit over scheduling of both yourself and your child. Prepare for transitions. For example, plan ahead and pack a healthy snack for the journey home from daycare. This might be all that is needed to help your child remain calm, alert and happy. (Stuart Shanker, 2012)

Help your child spot stress in themselves. If a 'melt down' happens take time later in the day to talk about it. Ask your child to think about what they were thinking or feeling before it happened. Spotting triggers and the signs of stress is a first step in your child learning to cope with stress.

Learning to relax and be mindful

Despite all of your best efforts to help your child to feel safe and secure, they will get stressed. How they bounce back from stress matters. Teaching children relaxation and mindfulness strategies when they are calm gives them a tool they can use when they are stressed. This may include; reading, parent-child yoga, being active, connecting with nature, using stress relievers such as play dough or breathing exercises.

Breathing together can help both you and your child to feel more relaxed, calm and strengthen your connection. Try the simple breathing exercises described in the following chart to teach your child how to be mindful.

| | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
|  | Blowing Bubbles | Children breathe in deeply and blow out slowly as they attempt to make bubbles. Encourage them to watch the slow, gentle movement of the bubbles as they blow. |
|  | Blowing on a Pinwheel | Children breathe in deeply and blow out slowly as they attempt to move the pinwheel. Encourage them to watch how the pinwheel turns with their breath. |
|  | Blowing on a Cotton Ball | Children breathe in deeply and blow out slowly as they attempt to move cotton balls placed on the palm of their hand. Encourage them to watch the movement of the cotton balls as they breathe. |
|  | Smell the Flowers! | Children breathe in to smell the flowers and slowly let their breath out. |
|  | Rock the Teddy Bear! | Children lie on their back and place their favourite teddy or 'cuddly' toy on their tummy. Encourage them to rock the 'teddy bear' to sleep by taking deep breaths (belly breathe) in and slowly breathing out – Remind the children to be gentle so that they don't wake the teddy bear! |
|  | Sparkle Jar | Mindfulness Jars can be used as a focal point for meditation or for helping a child to calm down when feeling agitated or stressed. Have the children shake the jar, take a deep breath and slowly let their breath out... Encourage them to watch the glitter gradually float to the bottom. Focusing on the glitter can help slow down their breathing and thought process, helping them to feel more relaxed. |