

Stressed Out Kids

Introduction

Stress is not a bad word. Kids need some form of stress to motivate studying for a test or practicing for a game or performance. Stress only becomes a bad thing when the pressure on the kid becomes too much to handle and they start to act out. But stress is something that your child has been dealing with since conception, thru birth, thru infancy and will continue to deal with as an adult. Stress is not something you, as a parent, should rescue your child from or they will never learn the necessary skills to cope on their own. What you can do as a parent, is learn to recognize signs that your child is not handling stress adequately. You can also learn how to minimize excessive stress in your child's life so that they can strive in the best available conditions.

Your child is taught how to handle stress by the way they see you and other people in life handle it. There are a lot of kids that manage to survive crises without psychological damage and then there are a lot of kids that suffer psychological damage with less than critical events. Your child is born with an innate tendency to be a seeker of comfort or a self soother. Factors like the emotional state of the mother during pregnancy, sleep and work habits, in utero nutrition, exposure to environmental toxins, drugs and medications as well as the birthing process all affect the tendency or temperament a child is born with. This initial tendency or temperament is further shaped by the attachments the child forms with caregivers, available nutrition, rest, genetic loading and exposure to nurturing, education and social experiences. The child's personality, psychological health, genetics and emotional support system are what determine his or her ability to handle stress. Most importantly, **exposure to stress** is critical in a child's ability to **learn** to handle stress. Handling stress may not be something that comes natural to you or your child but with enough practice and instruction, you can learn to "fake it till you make it".

Types of Stress

A reaction to stress depends on the type of stress that the child is exposed to. Life Stressors are grouped into 3 different levels or intensities.

1. **Developmental or Normative Stress** is stress your child is exposed to as a normal part of growing up. Examples: an infant sees a new face or hears a new voice, being away from Mom or Dad, starting or changing school, adjusting to puberty, rejection from a friend and not being able to master a task. Your child will typically manage these stressors by watching others and by practicing basic stress management methods they learn along the way.

2. **Critical Stress** involves things like personal or family issues. Examples include high or low levels of stimulation, family relocation, deployment of a parent, and illness or hospitalization of the child. Your child may react with unusual behavior like tantrums, crying spells or a change in appetite or sleep habits. You may even notice a short term change in personality. Your child typically manages this type of stress with the support of friends and family members.

3. **Catastrophic Stress** involves a serious event like natural disaster, serious illness, abuse or death of a family member. This type of stress is associated with the highest risk for impacting the psychological well being of the child. Support from family and friends may not be enough to help the child cope. Specialized care like counseling may need to be implemented.

Recognizing Stress in Your Child

Your child must learn to manage stress. Stress Management includes learning how to release the buildup of pressure. An inability to release pressure can result in physical, emotional and behavioral problems. As you read above, each child handles stress differently. For example, a family of 3 children, raised with the same parenting style may each respond differently to their parents' divorce. One child may appear well adjusted. Another child may become argumentative and actively aggressive while the other may start calling home from school with stomach aches. All three are managing the stress of the divorce in their own way.

Children by nature are self centered. They are born into this world with the idea that they express discomfort and someone sees to it that their discomfort is lessened. This is their earliest idea of cause and effect. It is understandable that a child may also assume that they have the power to "cause" bad things like divorce to happen. How does a child tell on himself? Don't wait for the child to approach you about their fears or concerns. Talk to them even if the information is presumably above their level of understanding. It is better for a child to have more information than less or you risk the chance that he or she will fill in the missing pieces incorrectly. Do not believe that your child is too young to pick up on things that are being talked about while they appear engrossed in their play. They hear bits and pieces and their imagination fills in the rest. Discuss things with them openly, honestly and simply. It's also natural for a child to deny fear or act like they understand it all. Do you remember doing that in school when you were younger? Don't rely on the child to ask questions.

A child experiencing stress will change the way he or she typically does things depending on their age and maturity level. They do not have the skills to handle stress because they have not yet developed reasoning skills or an accurate understanding of cause and effect.

The following examples are only problematic if they persist:

Inconsolable Crying

Sleeping too much or Unable to get to sleep

Nightmares or Requests to sleep with parents

Bed-wetting or Soiling Pants

Thumb-sucking

Eating too much or refusing to eat

Hoarding food or items

Crying if separated from parent

Fearfulness

Tics or repetitive movements like grunting, throat clearing

Sadness, cries easily

Whining

Aggression or Temper tantrums

Refusing to talk to some people or everyone

Picking at skin, nose, lips

Nail biting/chewing

Stomach or headaches

Nurse visits at school or Not wanting to go to school

Inability to focus or pay attention

Fidgeting/moving around a lot

The Do's and Don'ts of Helping Your Child Handle Stress

Do not minimize your child's fears or concerns or contradict your child's perspective. If they are afraid of the dark, it's not silly. It's serious to your child. Take them into their room and turn the lights out while you hold them. Talk them through their fear as you move toward the light switch, then allow them to feel the wall for the ability to turn the lights on. Do this as many times as it takes to remove their stress response to the dark. Work slowly toward getting them to do this with you standing in the doorway or outside the room or from another room until their fear of the dark is gone.

Do involve your child in the decision-making processes. You want your child to develop a sense of power and control within limitations. They should have input in even the logical consequences they receive for failing to follow house rules or maintaining good academic standing. When you give them the power to decide if a punishment is worth the negative behavior then they begin to see themselves as the responsible party versus blaming you for being the disciplinarian. When they CHOOSE to do the "bad" behavior, then they have CHOSEN the consequence and they are their own disciplinarian.

Do not hide family matters from your child. Talk to your child and explain the situation in the simplest way. If someone is sick with a terminal illness, tell them so they can visit and say goodbye or see them before they die. It is easier to deal with anticipated grief than sudden and unexpected loss. If someone died, tell them that the truth about the life cycle according to your belief system and prepare them for the funeral. A child is never too young to attend a funeral. They may not understand the intricacies but they understand that there is sadness when someone you love dies and it is okay if you cry and it is okay if you don't. Death is a normal part of life.

Do read with your child and play with your child. There are numerous children's books geared toward helping normalize your child's response to stress. Your child's feelings can be validated when they read about another child going through the same problems they are having. Playing with your child is a way to release stress. Children are often unable to talk about things that are bothering them but they can play things out without using words. They can get excited playing board games, become competitive playing video games and experience ventilation whether they win or lose. Cutting things out, coloring things in, painting things over and burying things under clay or sand or water; these are all ways that children can release stress.

Do not watch your children exercise, join them. Physical movement is an excellent way to discharge the built up adrenaline from a stressful event. Even when it's not feasible to go outside, calisthenics or even yoga can be enjoyed by you and your child. Joining another family in an activity provides an excellent way for your child to see you being valued by other adults and respected by other children.

Do eat a healthy balanced meal. Your child needs the essential vitamins and nutrients in order for his or her immune system to eliminate the negative effects of stress on the body and brain. Good sleep and plenty of hydration is important in keeping your child in top shape for handling life stressors. Moderate sugar keeps mood regulated. Moderate oil keeps joints and organs regulated. Moderate fat keeps the brain functioning. Too little can be worse than too much. Good for you if you are trying to eliminate artificial colors and preservatives but sugar is not artificial and neither is real chocolate. As a matter of fact, chocolate contains a precursor called choline that is converted in your body to acetylcholine which is a mood lifter. Now cauliflower contains the same precursor but you'll have a much harder time getting your kid to eat it.

Do not try to be perfect. Your child looks to you to teach him or her how to handle stress. If you have tried everything and nothing seems to work in removing problematic behavior, then it's time to get help. There is nothing wrong with seeking out professionals to help your child. This not only teaches your child to access the resources available but it may also save a lot of grief for you and your child.

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