

STRESS Taking Charge

Helping children manage stress

Sue and Tom are worried about eight-year-old Kevin. He complains of stomachaches and often cries when it's time to leave for school. He seems better in the evening but sometimes has trouble falling asleep at night.



All children feel stress from time to time: starting school, getting used to a new sibling, adjusting to a growing body during the preteen years, conflict at home, illness, parental separation, school problems (with the teacher, other children, or schoolwork). You can teach children ways to handle new or frustrating situations and manage stress.

Some signs of child stress

- Physical—headaches, stomachaches, vomiting, wetting
- Emotional—fear, irritability, sadness
- Behavioral—crying, nervous tics, losing temper
- Interactions with others—withdrawing, teasing or bullying, extreme shyness

Signs of stress in children often occur together, but no child typically shows all symptoms at once. A fearful or sad child may get stomachaches, cry, and withdraw from others. Others may become irritable, tease others, and lose their temper. Stress reactions can occur anywhere. In school a stressed child may be easily distracted, not follow directions, not complete assignments, have trouble concentrating, or show behavioral changes.

Differences in Children

Children react differently to stress. Some have easy-going personalities. From infancy, they get along with others and adjust to changes. Other children are easily upset and bothered by new situations. Personalities develop from genetic inheritance and environment. You cannot change children's genetics, but you can help them manage a stressful environment.

Sources of Stress

At school

- being away from home (ages 5–7)
- fear of wetting themselves (ages 5–7)
- fear of punishment from teacher
- worry about getting along with peers
- worry about schoolwork
- fear of being chosen last on any team
- fear of being different from others
- worry about changing bodies (ages 10 to 12)

Other major sources of stress

- divorce of parents
- move to new town or city
- being held back in school
- serious illness
- parent being called to war

Helping a Child Who Holds Feelings In

A child who holds stress in may try to be good, work hard in school, and make few demands on you. This child may worry, have low self-esteem, and be fearful, shy, or prone to cry easily. Physical symptoms like stomachaches, headaches, or frequent illnesses are common in children who internalize stress.

Seven-year-old Amber complained of stomachaches several weeks before second grade started. Barb, her mother, also noticed that Amber didn't sleep well. A doctor visit showed that Amber was healthy. Barb suspected Amber was worried about school starting. One night as she tucked Amber in, she told her this story.

"Once upon a time there was a very scared little girl named Abby. She worried about having a new teacher at school. Abby thought the teacher might not be nice. She also was afraid that her best friend wouldn't be in her class. She thought of ways to not go to school. But Abby's mother went with her on the first day when they met the new teacher, Miss Johnson. She was nice and Abby knew school would be okay. Then she saw her best friend, Jennifer, come in the door and she felt even better. That day after school, Abby came home and told her mom, 'I like second grade! It's going to be even better than first.'"

Helping a Child Who Lets Feelings Out

Children who act out stress may lose their tempers easily, become demanding or destructive, or may tease or bully other children. Research shows that under high-stress situations, boys tend to become more aggressive and disruptive, while girls become anxious or depressed. Children, however, may show the reverse: a boy may be fearful or depressed, and a girl may be aggressive or destructive.

Sue and Kevin were concerned about 10-year-old Jeremy. At school he was getting Cs and Ds instead of the usual Bs and Cs. His teacher had called about Jeremy fighting at recess. Sue and Kevin also noticed him teasing his sister more than usual. When they were called after another play-ground fight, they decided to ask Jeremy about his feelings.

After some gentle prodding, Jeremy told them that he had been mad since last fall when soccer started. He felt that the coach wasn't fair and didn't like him. Jeremy's parents helped him see how bullying other kids only made them angry. They helped him learn ways to deal with his anger and not take it out on others. Jeremy's dad agreed to help him improve his soccer skills. Both parents told Jeremy they would check with him and his teacher each week to see if things were improving.

Look for change to tell if a child who is either withdrawn or aggressive is showing signs of stress.

A generally outgoing and friendly child who becomes sad, withdrawn, or fearful probably is showing signs of stress. Similarly, a quiet and easy-going child who becomes irritable or aggressive may be stressed. As a parent you may or may not know what triggered your child's stress reaction.

Resilient Children

Resilient children have the following characteristics that help them cope with stress.

- a loving, supportive relationship with at least one adult
- belief in one's own effectiveness
- ability to assist the family
- belief that he or she is lovable and worthwhile
- connections to adults outside the immediate family
- effective problem solving
- belief in ability to make things better for himself/herself
- spiritual resources

Coping with Stress

Consider these ways to help children manage stress.

- Help children talk about what is bothering them. Don't force the talk, but offer opportunities such as bedtime or car trips. Instead of asking, "What's wrong?" ask, "How are things going at school?" Respect their answers; criticism may cause them to stop sharing.
- Work off stress through activities like bike riding, hiking, or swimming.
- Spend one-to-one time through hobbies you do together, making time to talk.
- Encourage healthy eating; it makes young bodies better able to handle stress.
- Eat meals together as a family; it helps kids eat better food, have better school grades, fewer problem behaviors, and better peer relationships than kids who don't eat with their family.
- Show kids how to relax by remembering or imagining pleasant situations like a favorite vacation or happy experience.
- Give short back or shoulder rubs and hugs to help kids relax.
- Teach kids that mistakes are learning opportunities and that everyone makes mistakes.
- Be clear about rules and consequences so kids know what is expected. Decide together on consequences for misbehavior. Then follow through.
- Role play ways to handle problem situations.
- Tell or read stories that show a child successfully coping with stress.
- Model ways to handle stress — exercise daily, eat healthy, relax with hobbies, and encourage mealtime sharing.

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