

Children and Stress: Caring Strategies to Guide Children

As adults, we are usually busy as parents and workers and often feel stressed and experience burn-out at times, but would you ever think that children can experience stress too?

Most of us probably think that childhood is a time when children are carefree, having no worries or responsibilities; yet, studies tell us that many children experience extreme stress and have similar symptoms as those of adults. Like adults, children often have bad feelings and have difficulty handling their stress. Unlike adults, though, children do not have the means or the skills to understand or manage their stress in appropriate ways. Children must depend upon us to help them. As parents and caregivers we need to recognize when children are feeling stressed and help them feel better. We can also help by decreasing the discomfort for the child and, in some instances, by assisting a child or family in dealing with the situation that caused the stress.

What is Stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to a physical or emotional situation that causes imbalance in a person's life. Occasional stress is normal and predictable in our daily lives. Normal stress serves to present us with challenges for greater learning and opportunity, such as the stress that we may experience before meeting new people. On the other hand, constant stress can cause us many problems and, unless handled, can add to the stress of another situation.

Children react in different ways to stress. Some children become ill. Some may become withdrawn and nervous while others show anger and demand attention. In some instances, development is affected. There are also some children who do not seem bothered by stress. We often call these children resilient.

Stress becomes a problem when the ordinary stress of daily life becomes overwhelming. When under stress, there is an increase in heart rate, breathing is faster, and muscles tense up. When there are several stressors, the level and duration of the stress are greater.

Causes of Stress

Both negative and positive events can cause stress. Family events are often a source of stress for children. The break up of a family is a negative event that can cause stress in children. Events such as physical abuse, separation, rejection, and fights are some other negative sources of stress. Other events such as a parent losing a job, or the death of a parent, grandparent, or sibling can create stress. Positive events that cause stress in children include birthday parties, new pets, and the birth of new siblings. Everyday family obligations, events, and routines can create stress and tension for the young child, as in the case of an active family that may be so busy that the needs of a young child may be overlooked.

Parents and caregivers need to be aware of what is happening in a child's life that may affect the child's behavior. A sudden change in a child's behavior may be related to stress. Caregivers can talk with the parents about what is going on in the home.

Signs of Stress

Common signs of stress are listed below. These signs also may indicate that the child is experiencing problems other than stress. How do you identify stress from other problems that the child may be experiencing?

First, parents and other caregivers must observe children's behavior. Children who isolate themselves from other children may be feeling stress. Also, the child who is easily agitated, irritable, lethargic, lazy, or aggressive may also suffer from stress.

It is also important to watch the child for changes in habits or behavior. For example, a friendly, quiet child who suddenly has been fighting and arguing with his friends may be suffering from stress. As a caregiver, you notice normal behavior among children and you will also be aware when there are changes in children's behavior.

How should you react when a child changes his or her normal behavior? Accepting the child's behavior is important. For example, it is useless to scold a child for thumb sucking. Scolding will not stop the behavior. Also, forcing the child to eat does not result in the child eating. When you notice unusual behavior, care for the child, remain close to the child, and comfort the child. Reassure the child that you care about him or her.

Possible Signs of Stress in Young Children

Accident proneness	Hitting
Anger	Kicking
Anxiety	Insomnia
Appetite Loss	Stuttering
Baby Talk	Indigestion
Bed-wetting	Thumb sucking
Biting	Pounding Heart
Crying Spells	Grinding Teeth
Detachment	Fingernail Biting
Excessive Aggressiveness	Respiratory Tract Illness
Excessive Laziness	Tattling

A first step in decreasing a child's stress is to be knowledgeable and aware of the symptoms of stress. These symptoms or warning signs include bed-wetting, upset stomach, irritability, nightmares, lying, withdrawal from activity, change in activity level, poor sleep or eating habits, teeth grinding, or decline in school achievement. Recognizing children's stress symptoms is not easy. It is very important to recognize that it is normal for children to exhibit some of these signs at some times in their lives. Adults need to be alert when a child is showing a cluster of these signs or symptoms simultaneously or when no apparent cause can explain why the child may be stressed. In either of these cases, it is a sign that the adults who are involved in the care of children need to intervene. If the child feels that it is impossible to handle the stress, he or she can become angry or aggressive. If the stress becomes too overwhelming for the child, then the child will experience anxiety. If the body remains in a state of anxiety, then physical, social, and emotional damage and deterioration can occur.

The age of the child is a factor in recognizing stress. Children often cannot tell us what they feel or they do not have the language to describe the stressful situation. They tend to show the stress through their behavior. When you notice a three-year-old child crying constantly (or more than usual), or an eight-year-old having a temper tantrum, that may be the child's way of alerting you to something or letting you know that too much is happening.

Children react differently to stressful events and situations and also have different coping strategies. Children can cope through tears and crying, through tantrums, or by retreating from unpleasant situations. Children who are around supportive adults and caregivers usually develop a variety of coping strategies and are more likely to become more resilient. Many children, however, do not have a supportive environment and do not learn a set of positive management strategies.

Strategies to Reduce Stress in Children/Helping to Manage Stress

Children need help in learning to manage and function with the stress they feel. One means to assist children is to **acknowledge their feelings**. It is important that children understand what they are feeling, that we teach the word "stress" by letting them know that they may feel "butterflies in the stomach," or that their heart may pound. Let children know that it is all right to feel angry, alone, scared, or lonely. Teach children names or words for their feelings and appropriate ways to express them. Show more interest in the child's experience than in the behavior that results. There are times when a child just needs a hug for reassurance. In the case of older children, help them learn to problem solve for themselves and come up with management (coping) strategies. This builds their independence and mastery of coming up with options, finding solutions, or finding other ways to comfort themselves. For example, if a child repeatedly bullies other children, lies, withdraws, gives up, hurts or blames other children, the adult can ask the child what other ways there are to handle the situation that caused the reaction in the child.

Promote a positive environment - Praise children for the acceptable things that they do. The experience of stress and tension can serve to defeat an individual's concept and confidence. Help children see and understand the positive things about themselves and that they are worthwhile persons. Listen without judging the child or the situation; that is, if the child chooses to tell you about the situation that produced the stress. Help the child feel comfortable in expressing feelings. Assist the child in clarifying his or her feelings. You may need to correct any misconceptions that the children may have about themselves or their feelings.

Set a good example - Children learn lessons from us, whether these lessons are positive or negative. Keep in mind that children are imitators and may cope with stress in the same ways they see adults handle their stress. In some cases, it is appropriate to explain, especially to older children, why something is being done. This explanation can often ease the child's reaction.

Help children through stories - Sometimes children can't talk to us about the distress they feel. They may not have the words or the concepts to easily express themselves. They may feel shy, embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed. If you try to talk to them using adult logic, most children will "turn off." How can we then talk to children about their fears and problems? How can we get through to them, let them know that we understand, and offer them ways to manage their fears and find comfort? Stories are a great answer. Children will "turn on" to story time. Some stories are therapeutic stories which help children feel better and cope better with their fears and problems. The character in the story can be a little boy or little girl just like them. They are worried about the same things and have the same problems to deal with. In the story, the boy or girl finds ways of coping with and resolving troubling issues of concern to the child. As the child listens to the story, he or she is able to identify with the hero or heroine. There is safety in the story. The child is free to listen and to learn without risking feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable.

Telling children stories about children with feelings just like theirs helps them realize that other children have been through the situation too. This is very reassuring to children. It also lets them know that you understand their feelings.

Telling a story also provides a way of communicating with children. If you are unsure of how children are feeling, you can ask them, "And what do you think John (name of the story character) was most worried about?" The answer that the child gives will be a direct reflection of his own fears, or anger. This communication about the story can be very effective because children can be very truthful and insightful about the feelings and fears of story characters even though they may be reluctant when asked about their own feelings.

When a parent tells a story to a child, an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy is created that is comforting for parents as well as children. It helps as a parent to know that storytelling is a simple, natural, and age-old technique that can be used to comfort children.

If a child is experiencing stress, there are other ways to assist the child to gain control. The aim is to help the child to relax. Some ways are: deep breathing exercises, listening to soothing music, reciting nursery rhymes and finger plays, listening to the rain fall, drawing or coloring. These "stress breakers" can help the child decrease the level of stress that he or she is feeling. Children can also learn to harness the positive energy of stress and use it to their advantage.

Additional Strategies

Be aware of the child's temperament; what seems to be fun for one child may feel overwhelming to another child.

Make an effort to cut down on activities when you see signs of stress in children's behavior. Allow children to go at their own paces. Structure activities so that children can cooperate with each other, lessening competition among children.

Teach children tricks for calming themselves, such as taking deep breaths, thinking of a quiet place, etc.

Take care of yourself! Children often pick up stress from parents and caregivers. Keep calm and control your anger.

Plan plenty of time for play. Inform children when there will be transitions or changes in the child care curriculum. Plan activities to allow children to express their feelings through play. Books, art activities, puppetry, play and drawing allow children to think through and label their feelings.

Reassure children that what has happened is not their fault. Children often believe that their "bad" behavior caused bad things to happen, such as the breakup of their mother and father. They have a tendency to assume guilt for situations that adults know are entirely beyond the child's control.

Give children a lot of cuddles, reassurances, and familiar routines, like a bedtime or sleep time story. Giving a child a special toy for comfort is also suggested.

Helping children to deal positively with stressful and tension causing events prepares them for healthy emotional and social development. This is an important responsibility of parents, teachers, and other caregivers: to effectively guide and help children.

Related Readings:

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