



Children & Stress

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Stress is the body's emotional or physical reaction to events, experiences, and changes. Stress itself is neither good nor bad. It is simply the way that the central nervous system reacts to the unknown. It can last only a short while or for long periods.

Both positive and negative events can create stress. Such exciting things may include preparing for a vacation, party or trying out for a team sport. Unpleasant things may include parental conflict, moving, the birth of a new sister or brother, school problems or social issues. Most times, the actual event is not negative. However, a child may *perceive* it as negative and may become "stressed out" because he or she fears the "unknown."

Stress can affect children in many a variety of ways. The actual events or experiences that cause stress will depend on the child's age. Younger children typically do not display stress in the same way as grown ups. Older children and teens, however, may show signs very similar to adults.

Birth-5

Young children may feel stress when they are left alone in a room, away from home, separated from parents/caregivers or have problems with peer interactions. Since young children lack the reasoning skills necessary to think through many of the situations they are faced with they may:

- Cry or whine
- Stand close or cling to a parent/caregiver
- Cover their eyes or face if they are afraid
- Become irritable
- Regress to such infant-like behaviors as sucking their thumb, have trouble sleeping, or have "accidents" if they are potty trained
- Change eating and sleep patterns (i.e. refuse meals, wake up in the middle of the night)

6-10

School age children may experience stress when they:

- Prepare for a test
- Receive unsatisfactory grades
- Forget to turn in homework
- Have problems with adult and peer relationships
- Relocate and/or change schools
- Go through their parents' divorce or separation

Older children may experience headaches, stomach aches or other physical symptoms. They also may:

- Whine, change eating and sleep patterns, or wet the bed or their underpants more frequently
- Use an emotion-focused coping strategy where they reduce stress by thinking of pleasant or happy things
- Seek solutions to reduce or eliminate stressful situations

10-12

Preteens may feel stress when they:

- Begin puberty and their bodies start to change
- Fear being punished by a parent or teacher
- Have academic problems
- Experience social challenges (i.e. not accepted by a clique, have an argument with a friend)

Physical signs may include:

- Headache or stomachache
- Irritability
- Acting out or losing temper
- Isolating/withdrawing from loved ones

13 and up

Teens may experience stress if they:

- Change schools
- Go through their parents' divorce or separation
- Have relationship problems with friends (either the same or opposite gender)
- Have school-related problems (failing or poor grades, negative student-teacher interaction)
- Have difficult interactions with parents and other adults
- Have a parent that is depressed

Both teens and preteens may:

- Try to find solutions for problems
- Act out or display anti-social behaviors
- Feel sad and hopeless
- Try alcohol or other drugs
- Have headaches, stomachaches or other physical symptoms
- Eat/use food to cope

Resilient Children

Some children handle stress better than others. Those in extremely difficult situations that can sometimes “defy the odds.” They are frequently referred to as resilient. *Resiliency* is the ability to bounce back or recover from stressful situations. Some factors that help young people demonstrate resilience include:

- A warm, loving and supportive environment
- Help and interaction from family members and other significant adults
- Boundaries and rules
- Involvement in such extra-curricula activities as sports and school or community clubs
- Adult commitment to education and school involvement
- Positive family values

Helping Children Manage Stress

There are a number of things that adults can do to help children manage. Some include:

- Keeping the lines of communication open
- Encouraging children to talk about what is on their mind
- Encouraging play and physical activity
- Maintaining a low stress environment
- Telling stories about how you dealt with problems when you were their age or appropriate things that you do now
- Reading stories that help demonstrate a particular issue such as moving or divorce
- Teaching appropriate conflict resolution and stress management strategies

This *Child Development* Fact Sheet is part of a series prepared by the Cooperative Extension Program at Tennessee State University.

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