



Helping Children Cope with Stress: What Can Adults Do?

While childhood may be perceived as a carefree time, children still experience stress. For children, stress can come from the multiple environmental demands placed on them, which conflict with their perceived ability to meet them. Children might feel overwhelmed by stress placed on them by external sources (e.g., school, peers, and society) or by demands that they place on themselves (e.g., excelling academically, conforming to norms, etc.). While stress can be a positive motivator for a child's development, children subjected to continued and/or intense stress might develop negative physical and psychological symptoms. For example, moderate amounts of pressure from adults, when paired with love and encouragement, can help a child succeed with tasks and enhance their abilities to manage stress in the future. However, experiencing particularly stressful events such as the death of a loved one, parental divorce, worries about the health and well-being of family members, bullying, etc., without adequate support, can cause a child to develop negative developmental, emotional, and behavioral symptoms.

How to identify when a child is feeling stress?

When children are not able to adapt and cope with stress, they may respond in several ways. Signs indicative of high levels of stress in children may include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Withdrawal, avoidance, and/or refusal to engage in activities
- Irritability/Acting out
- Difficulty controlling their emotions
- Headaches, stomachaches, body pain
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Nightmares
- Changes in academic performance
- Regression to behaviors that they have outgrown such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, nail biting, etc.
- Bullying, lying, and being defiant towards adults
- Excessive worry and/or sadness
- Separation anxiety
- Unhealthy eating habits
- Using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

What can adults do to help children cope with stress?

Adults cannot prevent children from experiencing stress or negative emotions. However, it is possible for adults to assist children in developing the skills to cope with stress in healthy ways. Here are some tips to help children develop resilience and cope successfully with challenges:

- **Notice your child's feelings.** Speak to your children about things that you notice might be bothering them. If possible, help children identify and label their feelings. Avoid making accusations or forcing your child to discuss their concerns. Be empathetic and show your child that you care and want to understand.

- **Resist the need to solve every problem for your child.** Be patient. Respond to your child's reactions in a supportive way, listen to their concerns, and help them find their own solutions. Motivating children to problem solve will increase their confidence and prepare them to make independent decisions in the future.
- **Discuss potentially stressful situations and events with your children, and help them prepare.** Help your children identify their strengths and coping skills, and talk about how to use them. Provide clear facts and developmentally appropriate information about stressful situations, and offer your children extra love, support, and reassurance.
- **Maintain regular routines and schedules for your children.** Avoid overscheduling your children. As much as possible, make sure that children have regular times for learning, eating, playing, relaxing, and sleeping. Ensure that your child gets proper exercise, nutrition, and rest.
- **Limit stress where possible and model appropriate behavior for children.** Make changes when possible to minimize unnecessary stress. For example, too many extracurricular activities might cause children to worry about fulfilling all their responsibilities. Thus, limiting the amount of activities might be appropriate. When changes are not possible, model appropriate self-care and coping strategies for your children.
- **Monitor your child's mental health.** Children are resilient and with the support of their parents and caregivers, many will be able to manage concerns. However, some children might have risk factors that lead to more difficulties managing stress. Be aware of warning signs and/or concerning changes in your child's behavior, and seek professional help if necessary.
- **Make time for your child.** Be there for your child. Even if children do not feel ready or comfortable to share their concerns immediately, it is important for them to feel that adults care and are there to support them. Keep children company, spend time together, and create a space to talk and interact with your child each day.

Most families have the skills to assist their children handle stress. However, it might be time to seek professional services when the stress is causing the child serious worries or anxiety, or when the family or the child's functioning is impaired.

For additional support, families with children between the ages of 0-22 can contact the Youth Services Department's Education & Training Center to receive free mental health services. Services are offered in-person and via telehealth. **To contact the Education & Training Center, please call 561-233-4460 or visit our [website](#).**

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