

HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO MANAGE STRESS

STRESS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Young children may find it difficult to recognize and to verbalize when they are experiencing stress. For children, stress can manifest itself through changes in behavior. Common changes can include acting irritable or moody, withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure, routinely expressing worries, complaining more than usual, crying, displaying surprising fearful reactions, clinging to a parent, sleeping too much or too little, or eating too much or too little.

STRESS AND OLDER CHILDREN/YOUTH

With youth, while spending more time with and confiding in peers is a normal part of growing up, significantly avoiding parents or expressing excessive hostility toward family members, may indicate that the youth is experiencing significant stress. While negative behavior is not always linked to excessive stress, negative changes in behavior are almost always a clear indication that something is wrong. Stress can also appear in physical symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches. Adults will want to pay attention to these behaviors and determine an appropriate response or intervention.

TYPICAL COPING STRATEGIES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- **Assistance Seeking** - getting advice or help from someone
- **Cognitive Problem Solving** - seeing the problem or issue in a new way; trying to figure out a plan
- **Cognitive Avoidance** - ignoring, moving on without reaction
- **Behavioral Avoidance** - wanting to be alone, feeling numb, withdrawing, not eating
- **Behavioral Acting Out** - feeling ill, verbal or physical aggression, crying, temper tantrums, eating

SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS TO USE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Be aware of how your child or youth interacts with others

Sometimes a child or teen may seem like his or her usual self at home but act out in unusual ways in other settings. It is important for parents to be vigilant about interaction patterns and changes.

Acknowledge and accept feelings

Children need help in learning to manage and to 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," that their heart may pound, or they want to be alone. Let children know that it is all right to feel angry, alone, scared, confused, 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. Help the child feel comfortable in expressing feelings. Communicate that ALL feelings are okay. 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.

Promote a safe, positive environment with unconditional love

The experience of stress and tension can serve to defeat an individual's self-concept and confidence. Help children see and understand the positive things about themselves and that they are worthwhile persons, whom you love. Listen without judging the child or the situation; that is, if the child chooses to tell you about the situation that produced the stress. There are times when a child just needs a hug for reassurance. Let them know that regardless of their negative or confusing feelings, your love is secure and unconditional. Structure their environment during times of stress so that they can relax and be assured that things will get calm and less scary. Experiencing a regular routine will enable them to feel more secure and reduce the effect of the number and intensity of changes.

Listen and translate

Because children and youth are often not familiar with the word "stress" and its meaning, they may express feelings of distress through other words such as "worried," "confused," "annoyed," and "angry." Children and youth may also express feelings of stress by saying negative things about themselves, others, or the world around them (e.g. "No one likes me," "I'm stupid," "Nothing is fun."). It is important for parents to listen for these words and statements and try to figure out why your child is saying them and whether they seem to indicate a source or sources of stress.

Understand you are a role model

Children and youth learn lessons from us, whether these lessons are positive or negative. Keep in mind that children and youth 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, why something is being done. This explanation can often ease the child's or youth's reaction. Keeping calm and showing some of the appropriate strategies for coping with stress will enable children and youth to observe and learn from you. Take care of yourself! Children and youth often pick up stress from parents. Keep calm and control your feelings. Do not allow what you feel to impact the child's or youth's feelings.

Use stories to help younger children

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 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/her 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.

Use 'play' and the arts with young children

Children love to play. It comes naturally to them. Plan activities that allow children to express their feelings through play. Books, art activities, puppetry, play and drawing allow children to think through and label their feelings.

Lead children and youth in relaxation and calming exercises

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

Allow children and youth time for to grieve, process, and adjust

Be aware of the child's and youth's temperament. What seems to be a coping mechanism for one child or youth may feel overwhelming to another. Allow children and youth to go at their own paces. Some may need more time than others to work through their anxiety, anger, and confusion.

Seek support

Parents, children, and youth do not need to tackle overwhelming stress on their own. If a parent is concerned that his or her child or youth is experiencing significant symptoms of stress it can be helpful to work with a licensed mental health professional, such as a psychologist. Psychologists have special training to help people identify problems and develop effective strategies to resolve overwhelming feelings of stress.

Tuning into cues

Adults can sometimes be unaware when their children or youth are experiencing overwhelming feelings of stress. Tuning into emotional or behavioral cues is important in identifying potential problems and working with your young person to provide guidance and support to successfully work through difficult times.

Understand that "feeling sick" may be caused by stress.

If a child or youth makes excessive complaints of frequent stomachaches or headaches (when they have been given a clean bill of health by their physician), or

if these complaints increase in certain situations that child or youth may be experiencing significant stress.

Talk with children and youth about stress

Young people may not recognize signs of stress or know how to respond effectively. Parents can offer valuable assistance and provide empathy and understanding. By knowing what to listen to and watch for and by seeking out opportunities to engage in conversation with children of all ages, parents can help their children and youth to better manage life challenges.

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.

Notice times when your child or youth is most likely to talk — for example, at bedtime, before dinner, in the car — and be fully available to just listen. Initiate conversations by sharing what you have been thinking about, or what other children or youth may be thinking about, rather than beginning a conversation with a question.

Actively listen

When your child or youth is talking about concerns, stop whatever you are doing and listen. Express interest in what they are saying without being intrusive. Listen to their point of view, even if it's difficult to hear. Let them complete their point before you respond. Repeat what you heard them say to ensure that you understand them correctly. Realize that your child or youth may test you by telling you a small part of what is bothering him or her. Listen carefully to what he/she says, encourage him/her to talk and they may share the rest of the story.

Respond thoughtfully

Soften strong reactions. Children and youth will tune you out if you appear angry or defensive. Express your opinion without minimizing theirs — acknowledge that it's okay to disagree. Resist arguing about who is right. Instead say, "I know you disagree with me, but this is what I think." Focus on your child's or youth's feelings rather than your own during your conversation. Ask your child or youth what he/she may want or need from you in a conversation, such as advice, help in dealing with feelings or assistance in solving a problem.

Be reassuring and positive

Let children and youth know that you love them no matter what they are feeling or thinking. Although you need to acknowledge their pain, anger, sadness, or confusion, remain optimistic. Trust and express your belief that he/she has the skills to figure out his/her feelings and to think through the issue. At the same time, offer support, love, and concern - unconditionally.