

Stress and Your Child

Everyone has stress in their lives. A little stress is a good thing, but too much is not good. Long-term stress is like a person working overtime with no chance to rest: he gets tired and worn out and is more likely to get sick. This happens to children, just the same as adults. Often children don't know what to do about it.

What causes stress in children?

Change (adjusting to something new and losing something old):

- New school, new home, divorce/separation

Worries and unknowns:

- Illness or someone in the family being sick
- Poor discipline methods (too permissive, too strict, or inconsistent)

Fears for their safety:

- Dangerous surroundings, gun shots in streets, parents using drugs
- Violence in family or neighborhood, child abuse

Doubts about important relationships:

- Does my father love me? Will my mother be there when I get home?

Too much responsibility for their age:

- Caring for younger brothers or sisters
- Caring for a parent who is drinking or on drugs

What are the signs of stress?

- stimulating himself constantly (masturbating, thumb-sucking, rocking back and forth)
- feeling tired
- having nightmares
- depression
- bed wetting
- hyperactivity
- behavior problems
- poor concentration
- being too sensitive to criticism
- daydreaming a lot
- grinding teeth when sleeping
- sleeping more than he needs to
- tics (muscle twitching, eye blinking, nose twitching, shoulder shrugging)
- irritability
- anxiousness
- chest pain
- stuttering
- restlessness
- feeling jittery
- clinging to caretakers
- looking unhappy
- frequent, prolonged temper tantrums
- more quarrels with playmates
- stomach aches, head aches

**These things can happen for other reasons too, so it's important to find the cause. **

How can you help children deal with stress?

1. Help your child relax and feel good about himself.
2. Slow down the pace of family life and extra activities.
3. Build fun and free time into each day.
4. Be sure your home is a safe place.
5. Be sure your child knows he can come to you for help.
6. Help identify reasons for stress and TALK about it.
7. Look at your own behavior. Don't add stress by doing things that are unpredictable or threatening to the child or others.
8. Try different ways to decrease stress. Ask your doctor about some of these:
 - Sports, hobbies, music, art, dance
 - Relaxation training
 - Hypnosis
 - Biofeedback
 - Meditation
 - Supportive counseling
9. Anticipate stressful occasions (birth of new baby, starting school, moving). Talk with your child about how to handle them.
10. Be alert for signs of stress.
11. PRAISE your child for doing well.

Call your child's health care provider if:

- Your child does not calm down after using the above techniques for 1 month.
- Your child seems unhappy all the time.
- Your child has tics each day that involve making sounds or swearing.
- You have questions or concerns.