

## Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents

Many things can cause stress in children—family circumstances such as those caused by financial strain, increased academic pressures at school, conflicts in peer relationships. Children experience stress directly and indirectly. Children can be affected directly by expectations of school, expectations of themselves, changes in family's financial circumstances or stress they see in their parents. They may be affected more indirectly by problems they hear and read about in the news or the stress of parents and teachers. Children look first and foremost to their parents and other significant adults to gauge the seriousness of their concerns.

### What is Stress?

Everyone is affected by stress and reacts to it in different ways. Stress is a way that our body responds to the demands made upon us by the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of those demands. We experience both "good stress" and "bad stress." Good stress is that optimal amount of stress that results in our feeling energized and motivated to do our best work. Good stress encourages us to develop effective coping strategies to deal with our challenges, which ultimately contributes to our resilience. Bad stress occurs when our coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by the stress and we do not function at our best. The same event can affect children and adults in very individual ways. Stress can become distress when we are unable to cope or when we believe that we do not have the ability to meet the challenge. The solution is to adapt, change, and find methods to turn that bad stress into good stress.

### Causes of Stress

**At School.** Stress can come from new or unfamiliar environments, unclear understanding of expectations, fear of failure, extended time of school day, and high stakes nature of schools.

**At Home.** Stress can occur through a lack of family routines, overscheduling, prolonged or serious illness, poor nutrition, change in the family situation, financial problems, family strife or abuse, or unclear or unreasonable expectations.

**Peer-related.** Stress can be a result of changing school buildings, challenges of making friends, trying to fit in with the crowd, or moving to a new community.

Stress tends to be additive in nature and with children can result in inappropriate behaviors, academic difficulties, or health problems. Parents can usually look back over recent events and see the causes of the behavior through the building of stressful situations.

### Symptoms of Stress in Children

- Irritability or unusual emotionality or volatility.
- Sleep difficulty or nightmares.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Drop in grades or other functioning.
- Eating or digestive concerns.
- Headaches or stomachaches.
- Unexplained fears or increased anxiety (that also can take the form of clinging).
- Regression to earlier developmental levels.
- Isolation from family activities or peer relationships.
- Drug or alcohol experimentation

### Factors That Help Prevent Stress

- Positive problem solving and coping skills.
- Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults.
- Time to relax or do recreational activities.
- Permission and ability to learn from mistakes.
- Feelings of self-efficacy (academic, social, extracurricular, and life skills).
- Consistent, positive discipline.
- Ability to express feelings appropriately.
- Feeling physically and emotionally safe.
- Good nutrition and exercise.
- Clear expectations