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## Helping Children Cope with Stress

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Purdue University

Cooperative Extension Service

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# Helping Children Cope With Stress

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## Introduction

Stress is a response to change or conflict. It is usually considered to be negative and damaging. However, not all forms or levels of stress are bad. Competing in sports and achieving in school or at work are examples of positive stressors. Stress becomes negative when the pressures surrounding these and other situations become too great or when several small stressors occur at once, and one can no longer adjust. It is becoming evident that this type of stress overload is taking its toll on children as well as adults.

This publication explains how stress exists in your child's world from infancy through the teen years. You will learn how to recognize signs of stress and help your child express, understand, and manage pressure. Suggestions on preventing excessive stress for your child also are provided.

## Children and Stress

How your child reacts to stress depends upon both your child and the source of stress. Many children have survived catastrophes without permanent emotional or psychological damage, while other children cannot easily adjust to less traumatic experiences. The personality of the child, as well as available support from family members, plays a major role in the child's ability to handle stressful situations.

## Developmental or Normative Stress

Another important factor influencing your child's reaction to stress is the actual nature of the stressor--the situation or event that causes the stress. One category of stressors is called *developmental or normative stress*. Developmental stress

accompanies the normal growing experiences of childhood. Some examples of this type of stressor are: dealing with strangers as an infant, being separated from parents, starting or changing schools, and adjusting to puberty. Most children deal with this form of stress quite successfully and become able to adapt to the changes that cause it by learning from the changes. Basic stress management methods that will be used throughout your child's life are developed during this growth process. Normative stress carries with it a low level of risk for your child's overall development.

## Critical Stress

Other family and personal pressures can be more intense and critical to your child's well-being than normative stressors. This type is called *critical stress*. These stressors are events that do not occur in every child's life, but are common. Some examples include unusually high or low levels of stimulation, moving to a new home, or the child being hospitalized. These events create medium levels of risk to your child's development. Changes in your child's usual behavior and personality might be seen in response to critical stress. Although more serious and threatening than developmental stress, most children manage to overcome these critical pressures if family members and friends are sensitive and supportive.

## Catastrophic Stress

Serious unexpected events often produce the most severe and *catastrophic* stress reactions in children. Some examples of this level of stress are: serious illnesses of the child or a family member, natural disasters, and abuse of the child. This level is associated with the highest risk for the child. The child experiencing such a crisis is often too overwhelmed to use basic resources for dealing with pressure and fear. A child suffering this level of stress has a great need for the understanding and support of family members, and may require more specialized care and counseling than parents are prepared or able to provide on their own.

Chart 1 outlines the three types of stress and gives examples of each for various age levels.

### Chart 1 Sources of Childhood Stress

Level of stress	Source of stress	Typical age of child
Normative or developmental (low risk)	Unfamiliar faces, surroundings	Infants, toddlers
	Sudden movement/loud noises	Infants, toddlers
	Separation from parents	Infants, toddlers
	Arrival of new sibling	Young children
	Starting school	Young children
	Being punished/disciplined	Young children
	Trying to achieve	Young children
	Peer acceptance	Preadolescents
	Adjusting to puberty	Preadolescents
Critical (moderate risk)	Lack of stimulation	Infants, toddlers
	Overstimulation	Infants, toddlers
	Overhearing parents fighting	Young children, preadolescents
	Moving to a new home	Young children, preadolescents
	Being hospitalized	Preadolescents
Family financial problems	Preadolescents	
Catastrophic (high risk)	Serious illness of self, family members, or close friend	Young children, preadolescents
	Home destroyed by natural disaster	Young children, preadolescents
	Divorce of parents	Young children, preadolescents
	Physical or sexual abuse	Young children, preadolescents
	Death of family member or	Young children,

## Recognizing Stress in Your Child

Stress is a physical tension of the mind and body which must be released for survival. Stress becomes a problem when pressure builds up to a point where the person can no longer adjust to changes in life. Releasing stress can be done in numerous ways which effect the child physically, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Because children have individual personalities, they react and handle stress in their own, often unpredictable, ways. Seven-year-old Kim reacts to attending a new school by bullying the other children. In a similar setting, eight-year-old Kathy becomes shy and withdrawn in the new classroom. One child may be deeply upset by a given event, while another may not give a second's notice to the same situation.

Recognizing stress reactions in children is not always easy. Even if you regularly discuss issues with your children, you may discover that they are slow to talk about problems which trouble them. Children think the world revolves around them; therefore, they sometimes feel they cause events. Often these events are not positive, and the children end up feeling misplaced guilt. Children may be scared or embarrassed to mention problems or negative feelings, especially if life at home is unsettled. You must not depend on words alone to signal when your child is upset. A child often will deny being troubled. Changes in behavior and personality are better signs of stress overload in children. A list of several common behaviors that can signal tension in children follows. Although they are arranged under specific age levels, most of these behaviors can be seen in children of any age. Most of them are normal characteristics of a child's development. However if the behaviors occur constantly, or if several of them persist over a long period of time, they may indicate a problem.

Infants and Toddlers	Preschoolers	School-age Children	Teenagers
Uncontrollable crying	Bed-wetting after being trained	Frequent whining	Aggression
Rocking back and forth	Thumb-sucking	Fearfulness	Withdrawal and sadness
Excessive sleep	Clinging to parents	Nightmares	Insomnia
Head-banging	Exaggerated fears	Bed-wetting	Excessive sleep
	Uncontrollable crying	Refusing to eat	Destructive actions
	Temper tantrums	Overeating	Depression
		Tics (nervous twitches)	Hypochondria
		Tendency to daydream	Uncontrollable emotions
		Frequent illness	

## Understanding and Helping to Control Your Child's Stress

It is easy to ignore or laugh away children's worries and concerns when comparing them to adult problems. Adults may say, "Why are you worrying about making the basketball team? It's not THAT important. You should have my worries!" But landing a spot on the junior high basketball team may be just as important to your child as a job promotion is to you. Remember what it was like to be five, nine, or fifteen years old. Problems are just as real to children at that age as they are to you at your age.

At times it may seem that children live in separate worlds of play and fantasy. Do not be fooled into believing that your children are not aware of changes taking place. A divorcing parent may say, "My child is too young to realize what divorce is, or to understand why we're splitting. She doesn't need to be worried about such things. It's enough that I'm falling apart about the divorce." Your children will not be protected or spared from any stress by being uninformed about major family events or crises. Children are talented at seeing and hearing matters from which they are supposed to be shielded.

Although children may recognize family events or crises and even be aware of global issues like the nuclear arms race,

they do not have the same resources as adults for dealing with the resulting stress. There are several developmental reasons for this:

- \* children do not have mature reasoning skills;
- \* they lack an accurate understanding of cause and effect; and
- \* they have not had the chance to become skilled at handling stress.

For example, a mother was telling a friend that she was going to traffic court to argue a parking ticket and would not be able to pick up her daughter from school that morning. When the daughter arrived at school, she burst into tears moaning that her mom was going to jail and she would never see her again.

You may decide not to tell your children about the divorce, the up-coming hospital visit, or Grandma's death, but by piecing together a few words or a change in behavior, your children may create their own version of what has happened. Often their account can be far from realistic and much more dramatic than the actual situation.

Spare your children added harm and stress. When a situation arises that will affect them in some way, discuss it with them honestly, simply, and at their level of understanding.

## **Preventing Stress Overload**

Your child cannot be protected from stress totally. Yet, you can help your child prevent pressures from building to a dangerous level. It is difficult to foresee what situations may strongly affect your child. However, there are several life experiences for which any child can be prepared.

Reading books and discussing issues with your child can help assist in preparing him or her for a new experience or change in life. Visits and other activities also can be helpful. What follows is a list of suggestions for helping to prepare your children for a variety of common childhood stressors.

### **Birth of a Sibling**

When planning or expecting another child, prepare your other children for the new arrival before the birth. Share books about babies and allow your children to join in the preparations and possibly the delivery. Hospitals often have sibling preparation programs for children. Communicate that the baby will belong to the whole family, not just to Mom and Dad.

### **Starting School**

Before your child starts school for the first time or changes schools, it is a good idea to visit the school while it is in session. Have your child meet the teacher. Practice walking to the school or riding the bus.

### **Moving to a New Home**

If you are expecting to move to a new city or neighborhood, remember to consider what the area has to offer your child. Take car rides through the area before the actual move takes place, or obtain photos of the new home. Allow your child to grieve the loss of old friends and places. Letter writing after the move can be helpful.

### **Illness**

Hospitalization or a visit to the emergency room can be quite disturbing to a child. Prepare your child to know what to expect. Check your community's hospital or talk with your physician about available hospital preparation programs and on-site visits if you expect a hospital stay.

## Natural Disasters

Your child can be prepared for handling emergencies such as a fire, storm, or other disaster. Teach him or her basic safety and emergency rules. Many community agencies often hold first aid courses for children. Look into them for your child.

## Divorce

If you and your spouse decide to divorce, do not leave your child uninformed. Children are aware of problems at home. While it may be difficult, a truthful discussion about the divorce will make things easier in the long run. Such discussion should lessen the chance of your child developing imagined fears or misplaced guilt.

## Death

Your child can be prepared for the feelings of loss which go with death. Useful learning experiences for examining life and death issues can be gained from the death of a pet or even the life cycle of a plant. Let your child attend funeral services of distant relatives or friends with you. The death of someone not close to the family is likely to be less emotional for you and your child than the death of a close friend or family member. It provides a chance for you and your child to discuss the subject.

## Helping Your Child Manage Stress

Some stress is a normal part of growing and living because your child's world--and your child--are constantly changing. Normal pressures and tension will naturally disappear as your child's reasoning and mental skills grow and experiences increase. This is especially true for the stress that accompanies developmental growth. However, when stress reaches the crisis level in your child, help from family members, a teacher, the family doctor, or other professionals may be necessary. In most cases, though, you can help your child cope with pressures of childhood by using the following techniques:

**Think of how you react to stress.** Children learn from imitating the actions of parents and other adults. You may be surprised to discover that he or she reacts to pressures the same way you do. If you do not like what you see, a change may be in order for all.

**Try to remember what it was like to be your child's age.** View the situation on the child's level of understanding. Only by looking at the problem through your child's eyes can you grasp your child's feelings, reactions, and fears. Do not deny or make fun of your child for his or her worries. These worries are real to your child and need your attention.

**Talk with your child about his or her concerns and problem behavior.** Communication is a source of information, comfort, and security. Tension often reaches the boiling point when children feel like they are facing a source of stress alone. Knowing that their worries can be expressed helps relieve some of the pressure, as well as builds a more rewarding parent-child relationship.

**Tell your child the truth about family matters and crises.** Your child does not live in a bubble. If you do not provide honest and simple accounts of a stressful event, your child will probably create an even more alarming explanation. The goal is to lessen or prevent your child's stress. Explanations which are simple, accurate, and at the proper level of understanding are best.

**Involve your child in decision-making and problem-solving processes when dealing with sources of stress.** This will encourage your child's feelings of power and control. Sources of stress will be with your child throughout life, so by providing your child the necessary tools for handling stress now you will be helping him or her to cope with stress better later as well.

**Select good children's books about stress and fears to read with your child.** Books about hospitalization, starting school, death, divorce, a new brother or sister, and other life events are good sources of honest information. They can clear up misunderstandings and feelings for your child, as well as help you to discuss difficult topics. They can assure your child that there are others in the world with the same problem, and give suggestions on how to manage the situation. Recommended children's books about sources of stress are listed at the end of this publication.

**Use art and puppets to help your child express feelings and concerns.** Through the use of art materials, your child can express feelings and thoughts that might be considered negative and unacceptable. These thoughts and feelings then can be handled in an acceptable manner. Learning to express emotions through creative channels gives the child an outlet for built-up tension that can be used throughout life. Because young children are limited in verbal ability, strong feelings can be expressed through art experiences which involve psychomotor activity, such as clay for pounding, paper for tearing and cutting, and nails for hammering. Puppets and dolls provide opportunities to examine reality, rehearse solutions, express emotions, gain control over situations, and encourage discussion.

**Provide physical outlets to vent built-up tension.** The inner tension that is stored needs to be released. Encourage your child to participate in physical activity when pressures seem ready to explode. Possibly join your child in biking, swimming, running, or even gardening. Physical activity releases negative tension through positive action. It is also important to get plenty of rest and eat nutritionally balanced meals during periods of high stress.

Be generous with hugs, kisses, and other signs of affection. Your child needs love and understanding more than ever during times of stress.

## Related Publications

For additional information, contact your county Extension office for the following related publications or browse or print them from url:

[http://hermes.ecn.purdue.edu/http\\_dir/acad/agr/extn/agr/acspub/humandev.html](http://hermes.ecn.purdue.edu/http_dir/acad/agr/extn/agr/acspub/humandev.html)

HE-168 Caring About Kids: Explaining Death to Children

HE-169 Helping Children Overcome Fears

HE-170 Helping Children Cope With Divorce

For Further Reading

These suggested books for parents and children illustrate several of the more common childhood sources of stress. Check your local library for these and other books which can help you and your child prepare for and learn how to manage stress.

## Written for Children

Alexander, B. *Nobody Asked Me If I Wanted a Baby Sister*. New York. The Dial Press, 1971. (sibling rivalry)

Elder, B. *The Hospital Book*. Baltimore. John Street Press, 1977. (illness)

Gackenback, D. *Harry and the Terrible Whatzit*. New York: Scholastic, 1977. (fears)

Gardner, R. A. *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce*. New York: Bantam Books, 1970. (divorce)

Mellonie, B. and Ingpen, R. *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983. (death)

Sweet, E. Something Happened to Me. Racine, WI: Mother Courage Press, 1981. (sexual development)

Viorst, J. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney. Bloomfield, CT: Atheneum, 1971. (death)

Welber, R. Goodbye, Hello. New York: Random House, 1974. (starting school)

### Written for Adults

Anthony, E. J. and Chiland, C. (eds). The Child in His Family: Children and Their Parents in a Changing World. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978.

Arnold, L. E. Helping Parents Help Their Children. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1977.

Barman, A. Helping Children Face Crises. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1976.

Wolff, S. Children Under Stress. London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1969.

Wolman, B. Children's Fears. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978.

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Barman, A. Pressures on Children. Toronto: Public Affairs Committee, Inc., 1980.

Dunn, J. Distress and Comfort. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

Elkind, D. The Hurried Child--Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981.

Jalongo, M. R. "Using Crisis-Oriented Books With Young Children." *Young Children*, 5 (1983): 29-36.

Klinzing, D. and Klinzing, D. The Hospitalized Child: Communication Techniques for Health Personnel. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977.

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