

Childhood Stress

By Jaclyn M. Cheek

Stress is something that people experience everyday, and is an unavoidable aspect of life. It is a response to a situation or factor that creates a negative emotional or physical change or a combination of both. Previous experience, education, and support help most people respond appropriately to stress and to change as the circumstances require. What about children? Can children get stressed as well? The answer is yes.

Children learn to respond to stress by their own experiences and observations. Many stresses felt by children may seem insignificant to an adult, but since children do not have many experiences from which to learn, even situations that require small changes can have enormous impacts on a child's feelings of safety and security.

Pain, injury, and illness are major stressors for children. Recognition of parental stress (such as a divorce), and death or loss of a loved one are severe stressors for children. Other stressors can include changes in schools, neighborhoods, and childcare arrangements. The impact of a stressor depends a great deal on the child's personality, maturity, and style of coping. It is not always obvious, however, when a child is stressed. Children may have difficulty telling you how they feel, and may say, "My stomach hurts", instead of saying, "I feel overwhelmed". Some children cry, become aggressive, talk back, or become irritable when they are stressed. Some physical symptoms of stress in your child could be headaches, upset stomach or vague stomach pain, sleep disturbances, nightmares, new or recurrent bedwetting, decreased appetite or other changes in eating habits, stuttering, or other physical symptoms with no physical illness. Some emotional or behavioral symptoms include anxiety, worries, inability to relax, new

or recurring fears, clinging, questioning, anger, crying, whining, inability to control emotions, aggressive behavior, stubborn behavior, regression to behaviors that are typical of an earlier developmental stage, and unwillingness to participate in family or school activities.

There are a number of things that parents can do if they suspect their child is stressed. Some of these include providing a safe, secure, familiar, consistent, and dependable home; being selective in the television programs you let your child watch, which can produce fears and anxiety; spending calm relaxed time with your children; encouraging questions; encouraging expressions of concern, worries and fears; listening to your child without being critical; building your child's feelings of self-worth; trying to use positive rewards and encouragement instead of punishment; allowing your child opportunities to make choices and have some control over his/her life; encouraging physical activity; developing awareness of situations and events that are stressful for children; recognizing signs of unresolved stress in your child; keeping your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes such as changes in jobs or moving; and, seeking professional help or advise when signs of stress do not decrease or disappear.

Signs of stress in children should be taken seriously, as stress can lead to problems in school and affect a child's social and cognitive development. You should seek professional help for a child if stress is preventing the child from getting on with their normal, everyday life.

For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite

309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at <http://www.emory.edu/MSACD>

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