

# Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet 1999  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
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## Strong Families ... Strong Futures

# Kids Get Stressed Too!

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As a parent you know that you are busy and often under stress, but did you know that your children can experience stress too? We think of childhood as a time of freedom from responsibilities, worries, and stress. Yet studies show that many children today are suffering from too much stress. Since children often cannot tell us what they are feeling, they tend to show stress through their behavior. When you notice your three-year-old crying more than usual or your eight-year-old having a tantrum, he or she may be letting you know that too much is going on.

### Sources of Stress

Although instability of family life is probably the most serious problem children face today, many economic, social, and personal problems raise their stress levels. Keep in mind, too, that things that cause disruption of routines, times of transition, and life changes (even if they are positive things) can be felt as stress because they involve change. Stressors might include:

- Death of family member, friend, or pet
- Personal illness or injury
- A parent changes or loses a job
- Difficulties with school
- The birth of a sibling
- Problems getting along with siblings
- Moving to a new house
- Change in child care arrangements.

### Recognizing Stress

Reactions to stress vary with the child's stage of development, ability to cope, the length of time the stress continues, intensity of the stress, and the degree of support from family and friends. The two most frequent indicators that children are stressed are change in behaviors and regression of behaviors. Children under stress change their behavior and react by doing things that are not in keeping with their usual style.

Preschoolers may react by exhibiting irritability, anxiety, uncontrollable crying, trembling with fright, and eating or sleep problems. Toddlers may regress to infant behavior, feel angry and not understand their feelings, fear being alone or without their parent, withdraw, bite or become sensitive to sudden or loud noises. They may become sad, angry or aggressive, have nightmares, or be accident-prone.

Elementary-age children react to stress by whining, withdrawing, feeling unloved, being distrustful, not attending to school or friendships, and having difficulty naming their feelings. Under stress, they may worry about the future, complain of headaches or stomachaches, have trouble sleeping, have a loss of appetite, or need to urinate often.

Preteens and adolescents under stress may feel angry longer, feel disillusioned, lack self-esteem, and generally distrust everything. Sometimes they will show extreme behaviors ranging from doing everything they are asked to breaking all of the rules by taking part in high-risk

behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, shoplifting, or skipping school. Depression and suicidal tendencies are concerns.

## Building Safety Nets for Stress

Just as children's reactions are each different, so are their coping strategies. Children can cope with stress through tears or tantrums or by retreating from unpleasant situations. They may be skilled at considering options, finding compromise solutions, or finding substitute comfort. Children who live in supportive environments and develop a range of coping strategies are able to bounce back from stress and crisis. Factors that support children and create a safety net include: a healthy relationship with at least one parent or close adult, well-developed social and problem-solving skills, ability to act independently, a sense of positive self-esteem, ability to focus attention, and special interests and hobbies.

## Support from Parents

Parents need to listen to their child's feelings. Too often, however, a parent's inclination is to "spare" a child when a crisis develops within the family. Children know when something is terribly wrong and the uncertainty connected with lack of knowledge about that "something" adds to their stress. Children do not need to know all the grown-up details of a divorce, an economic crisis, or a death, but they do need to know the basic facts of a situation and to be reassured that the crisis is not their fault. Other helpful suggestions include:

- Tell your child you have noticed that something is bothering them. Children need to know that someone recognizes they have a problem.
- Try to put as much order in your child's life as possible: provide a place to study, set aside specific times for school work, meals, chores, recreation, and bedtime.
- Help your child build friendships that support them. Encourage them to invite friends over.
- Suggest activities that can help your child cope with stress. Laughter, exercise, counting to ten, and keeping a journal are all ways to beat stress.

## Final Thought

As adults, we can make sure we don't add to children's stress by expecting them to act in adult ways. We can praise, be positive, seek positive solutions, help children name their feelings, teach fairness, help children learn to like themselves, be patient, teach honesty, and give lots of love and encouragement, particularly during difficult times.

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