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Helping Young Children Through Stressful Times

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Childhood stress has many sources. Negative or uncertain experiences are not the only causes of symptoms of stress in children. Both negative and positive events may add to the stress children experience. When an extra demand is placed on a child's ability to cope, stress occurs. When a child is excited about an upcoming event, stress occurs. Sometimes the stress is from a combination of excitement and uncertainty.

For many children stress comes from common changes, such as, starting school or child care, birth of a new baby, illness, separation or divorce of parents, parent job changes, moving to a new location, loss of a pet, or a death in the family. Stress can also come from exciting events, such as, a birthday party, a trip to the zoo, swim lessons, dance classes, sports, a holiday celebration, or relatives coming to visit.

Recognizing that stress exists and ensuring that your children's basic needs are met helps them be more resilient when stress occurs in their lives. Rather than trying to shield your children from all stress, provide them with basic coping skills and resources to prepare for the future challenges of life. You are a role model for your children. They watch how you react to stress. Being aware of this allows you to model ways to respond and adapt to life stress.

Today's children also experience traumatic stress from homelessness, natural disasters, drugs, alcohol, terrorism, war, and violence in schools, neighborhoods, or homes. Traumatic stress can be within the home, in the local community, national, or international. We witness these situations through television, the internet, and other media.

Symptoms to Look For

While change is a natural part of the development of children, no two children experience change in exactly the same way. Having a positive relationship with both parents or one significant adult can be the beginning of a support system for your children when stress occurs.

Look for behaviors that are not the norm for your children. Noticeable emotional, social, physical, and intellectual changes, whether positive or negative, are a signal to check out the possibility of stress as a factor. It can be easier to identify changes when a child is acting out in a negative way. The most difficult reaction to identify can be perfection, but it can be more harmful to a child than acting out. Who would complain if one of their children suddenly became the perfect child—doing chores without being told, getting A's at school, and not causing any behavior problems? However, this kind of behavior can be quite a burden for a child to carry day-in and day-out.

Children under stress may appear more fearful, sensitive, tense, aggressive, greedy, angry, restless, irritable, and unable to tell you why they feel this way. They may be more aggressive or withdrawn. Children under stress may be more prone to accidents, illness, ulcers, and headaches. They may have lower energy levels and trouble with constipation or diarrhea even though they are healthy. They may bite their fingernails or grind their teeth during sleep. Child under stress may be easily distracted or restless and have difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Their expression may seem dull or vacant. They may be preoccupied with images of monsters or other threats and/or daydream more than usual. All of these symptoms could be signs that a child is experiencing stress.

Some Ways to Help

- Set realistic expectations according to each child’s developmental level.
- Help your children feel good about themselves by providing encouragement.
- Nurture and cherish your children. Say “I love you.” Let them know you are there for them.
- Verbally recognize positive behavior. When unacceptable behavior occurs, redirect your children by stating the options. Help your children find acceptable ways to express negative feelings.
- Reduce family conflict. Interact positively with each other and with your children.
- Communicate using I messages: When _____ I feel _____ because _____.
- Take the time to develop mutual respect and trust. Let your children make choices when appropriate.
- Listen to what your children are saying, notice their body language, and take time to talk with them.
- Model positive ways to deal with stress and change. Let your children see that life goes on even when things do not go the way we wish.
- Spend time together. Interact with your children. Share your heritage, thoughts, values, and experiences.
- Allow your children to help you when appropriate. Be prepared for the task to take longer.
- Discipline using logical consequences. Limit “time out.” Above all, be consistent.

- If one of your children is having difficulty adjusting, limit additional life changes when possible.
- Use books to discuss challenging topics.
- Let children express how they are feeling through the use of art, writing, music, or dance.
- Limit and monitor television and technology. Discuss events with your children. Encourage them to find ways to help others, such as, collecting items or making cards to send.
- Remember the value of laughter.
- Seek professional help for your children and/or yourself when needed.

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