

Stress in Children: A Handout for Parents

Overview

Stress is a feeling of discomfort that is experienced somewhat differently by children and adults and from one individual to another. Our world is full of situations and events that cause stress unemployment, marital tension, death of a parent or sibling, serious illness or injury, unexpected bills, etc. Particularly for children, stressful events might include parents' divorce, abuse or neglect, poverty, school failure or illness. Even positive events can create a degree of stress such as moving to a new home, a new job, a new baby in the family, etc. Although a certain amount of stress is good, life today presents most of us with more stress than we want or need. The age of the computer, of instant information, of instant evaluation of our actions, rather than making life easier as we always thought it would has added to the expectations that others have of us or that we have of ourselves. With a little more time, we feel that we can always do "just a little bit more."

It is important to distinguish daily life "hassles" from significant stress. Parents and children experience such common hassles as waiting in line (at the bank, in the school lunch line), changes in daily routine, rescheduling appointments, conflicts with family members or friends, etc. Generally, children (as well as adults) learn strategies to effectively cope with these small hassles. Significant stressors, such as a death, loss of income or serious illness, are more likely to catch children or adults unprepared to cope. These events result in serious consequences for the individual's physical and emotional well-being. However, while life's "hassles" generally have less negative consequences, the cumulative effect of many such "hassles" can be as detrimental as any single traumatic event. The perception of stress is also related to experience and development what is stressful for one person may not even amount to a small hassle for another. The ability to evaluate stress level and to develop coping skills increases with age and cognitive development.

Our environment is stressful. But much of our stress is caused by our mental attitude in conjunction with the environment. Can you remember a time when something happened that nearly sent you "through the ceiling" in anger, even though on another day the same event might have bothered you very little? This is an example of the effect of our thoughts on our mood. Having to get something done for a sympathetic loved one is much less stressful than having to get the same task done for a boss, a teacher or another individual who has power over us or whose expectations we feel we have to meet. Thus, it's not the situation that causes all the stress. Our beliefs about the situation are a big piece of the puzzle.

Although different individuals will find different events more or less stressful, stress in children is usually caused by:

- New, unfamiliar or unpredictable situations
- Unclear expectations
- Expectations of something unpleasant (e.g., pain)
- Fear of failure (socially or academically)
- Major developmental "hurdles" (moving from elementary to middle school, leaving home)

Symptoms of Stress

The effects of stress vary from one person to another and each person may develop unique symptoms or individual styles of handling stress. Some environments (e.g., homes, schools, etc.) are more stressful than others. Additionally, constitutional factors, including gender and temperament, play a significant role in how stress is perceived and handled. Stress is cumulative and progressive, and improved resources and coping skills are often necessary to reduce its ill effects.

There are generally three recognized stages of stress marked by phases of physical changes: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. In the first stage of stress, the body goes into "red alert" with an increase in heart rate and breathing as the individual considers a course of action. This is followed by "resistance" where the body attempts to slow down and return to "normal." If the stressful event continues or if the individual is unable to adapt to the situation, exhaustion may follow.

Symptoms of stress in children: Symptoms of stress in young children may be difficult to distinguish from symptoms of minor illness. Be alert for signs of irritability, sleeping, toileting or eating difficulties, fearfulness, difficulties adapting to change in routine and clinginess, or use of key words such as "sad" or "afraid." As children get older, their responses to stress may include more attention-seeking behaviors, mood changes, avoidance of certain activities, isolation (such as the adolescent who retreats more and more to his or her room), school refusal or changes in the quality of schoolwork, sleeping difficulties and physical complaints (headache, stomachache). Seek help for your child if the symptoms persist or you are not able to identify the basis for these concerns. Your school psychologist, social worker, counselor or family physician can help locate appropriate resources.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Children who experience overwhelming stress may develop Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD refers to stress resulting from a specific incident: an incident severe enough to cause profound damage to an individual's ability to cope in everyday life, especially in those parts of everyday life that remind the person of the traumatic incident. Although the information in this handout may be of some help to people who suffer from PTSD, such individuals are advised to consult with a qualified professional for more specific evaluation and treatment to diminish the effects of the incident.

What Can I Do as a Parent?

Do not place undue expectations on your child. We all want our children to be successful, and we should have expectations for their behavior and performance. But when stress starts to show itself, it may be time to question if our expectations are too high.

Listen to your child when he or she describes stressful events or situations. Being a good listener will, first of all, reassure your child that you are there with love and support. Moreover, it will help you to better understand how you can help.

Teach your child good problem-solving skills. The feeling that we have too much to do in the amount of time available to us is a frequent cause of stress. When overburdened, we have difficulty seeing how to get ourselves out of the jam we're in. Help your child learn to break big problems into smaller ones that can be dealt with one at a time. Talk with them about how you have handled stressful situations.

Rehearse stressful situations. If speaking in front of a group or making a phone call to an adult is a cause for stress, it can be helpful to talk through the event with your child. Discuss how he or she wants the event to take place, and then go through the situation together in a "trial run." The practice is good, and possible difficulties can be "problem solved" together.

Be aware of "irrational thinking" patterns. Sometimes we can overhear our children "thinking aloud" with sentences like "I have to get this done or my friends are going to be mad," or "If I don't do this extra assignment, I'll never get into college." More frequently, only the first part of the sentence is there: "I have to do what the other kids are doing," "I shouldn't really be reading this novel just for fun right now," or "I need to get this whole list of things finished right now." Often hidden behind such thoughts is the unfounded belief that "if I don't live up to my teacher's expectations, I'll never be a success in life," or "if friends get mad at me, then that confirms that I'm not a good person." And, deep down, these "ifthen" statements frequently mask core beliefs that people accept as true, even if they have never questioned them logically. These are beliefs like "I'm not a very loveable person," or "the world is a cruel place, and the only way to survive is by doing everything perfectly." If you become aware of harmful beliefs, help your child look at life, and him or herself, more realistically and more positively.

Relaxation/Visualization. There are a number of good relaxation tapes on the market, but all of them emphasize the importance of sitting or lying down and breathing slowly from deep in the stomach, rather than breathing where the shoulders or chest is in motion. A frequently-used visualization technique is that of relaxing (as above), and then imagining one self in a "favorite place" a place that is warm and inviting, comfortable and beautiful. Relaxation techniques are useful for diminishing the feeling of stress, but they do little to keep stress from reoccurring. Relaxation can be especially effective when used in conjunction with the rehearsal of a stressful situation before it occurs. Some children might need professional assistance to learn effective relaxation techniques. Also, remember that for children as well as adults, exercise is not only a good way to "relax" but a good way to reduce both the physical and emotional "baggage" of stress!