

Sources of Stress

Pressures often come from outside sources (such as family, friends, or school), but they can also come from within. The pressure we place on ourselves can be most significant because there is often a discrepancy between what we think we ought to be doing and what we are actually doing in our lives.

Stress can affect anyone who feels overwhelmed — even kids. In preschoolers, separation from parents can cause anxiety. As kids get older, academic and social pressures (especially the quest to fit in) create stress.

Many kids are too busy to have time to play creatively or relax after school. Kids who complain about the number of activities they're involved in or refuse to go to them may be signaling that they're overscheduled.

Talk with your kids about how they feel about extracurricular activities. If they complain, discuss the pros and cons of quitting one activity. If quitting isn't an option, explore ways to help manage your child's time and responsibilities so that they don't create so much anxiety.

Kids' stress may be intensified by more than just what's happening in their own lives. Do your kids hear you talking about troubles at work, worrying about a relative's illness, or fighting with your spouse about financial matters? Parents should watch how they discuss such issues when their kids are near because children will pick up on their parents' anxieties and start to worry themselves.

World news can cause stress. Kids who see disturbing images on TV or hear talk of natural disasters, war, and terrorism may worry about their own safety and that of the people they love. Talk to your kids about what they see and hear, and monitor what they watch on TV so that you can help them understand what's going on.

Also, be aware of complicating factors, such as an illness, death of a loved one, or a divorce. When these are added to the everyday

pressures kids face, the stress is magnified. Even the most amicable divorce can be a difficult experience for kids because their basic security system — their family — is undergoing a tough change. Separated or divorced parents should never put kids in a position of having to choose sides or expose them to negative comments about the other spouse.

Symptoms of Stress

While it's not always easy to recognize when kids are stressed out, short-term behavioral changes — such as mood swings, acting out, changes in sleep patterns, or bedwetting — can be indications. Some kids experience physical effects, including stomachaches and headaches. Others have trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork. Still others become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone.

Younger children may show signs of reacting to stress by picking up new [habits](#) like thumb sucking, hair twirling, or nose picking; older kids may begin to lie, bully, or defy authority. A child who is stressed may also have nightmares, difficulty leaving you, overreactions to minor problems, and drastic changes in academic performance.

Reducing Stress

How can you help kids cope with stress? Proper rest and good nutrition can boost coping skills, as can good parenting. Make time for your kids each day. Whether they need to talk or just be in the same room with you, make yourself available.

Even as kids get older, quality time is important. It's really hard for some people to come home after work, get down on the floor, and play with their kids or just talk to them about their day — especially if they've had a stressful day themselves. But expressing interest in your kids' days shows that they're important to you.

Help your child cope with stress by talking about what may be causing it. Together, you can come up with a few solutions like cutting back on after-school activities, spending more time talking with parents or teachers, developing an exercise regimen, or keeping a journal.

You can also help by anticipating potentially stressful situations and preparing kids for them. For example, let a child know ahead of time (but not too far ahead of time) that a doctor's appointment is coming up and talk about what will happen there. Keep in mind, though, that younger kids probably won't need too much advance preparation. Too much information can cause more stress - reassurance is the key.

Remember that some level of stress is normal; let kids know that it's OK to feel angry, scared, lonely, or anxious and that other people share those feelings.

Helping Your Child

When kids can't or won't discuss these issues, try talking about your own concerns. This shows that you're willing to tackle tough topics and are available to talk with when they're ready. If a child shows symptoms that concern you and is unwilling to talk, consult a counselor or other mental health specialist.

Books can help young kids identify with characters in stressful situations and learn how they cope. Check out *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst; *Tear Soup* by Pat Schweibert, Chuck DeKlyen, and Taylor Bills; and *Dinosaurs Divorce* by Marc Brown and Laurene Krasny Brown.

Most parents have the skills to deal with their child's stress. The time to seek professional attention is when any change in behavior persists, when stress is causing serious anxiety, or when the behavior is causing significant problems in functioning at school or at home.

If you need help finding resources for your child, consult your doctor or the counselors and teachers at school.