

young families

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Stress in Children

Adults are not the only ones affected by stress. Recent medical reports indicate that stress-related illness and symptoms in children are on the rise. This includes all ages, from preschoolers to adolescents.

Stress occurs when the demands placed upon an individual strain one's capacities and resources or are felt to be a threat to one's safety, well-being, or esteem. In children, various situations can produce stress.

Sources of Stress

Parents may underestimate the frustration, energy, and effort required by children to cope with the demands of their daily lives — the requirements of school, the ups and downs of relationships with other children, the demands for achievement and excellence, and the expectation of mature performance at an early age.

Another source of stress may be the instability in a child's home life. Families are frequently on the move, and children have to adjust to a different community, a new school, and new friends. A great many children will experience the loss of a parent through death or divorce. While children are amazingly resilient and in most cases will eventually adjust successfully, loss or separation from a parent is almost always a deeply stressful process.

Uncertainty is another cause of stress. Uncertainty has been shown to be more stressful than certainty — even when the "certainty" is unwanted or undesirable. Have you ever been in an unfamiliar setting or situation — where you didn't know the other people or the "rules," where you hadn't developed needed skills, or didn't have all the information or knowledge required? Did you feel uncomfortable, "discombobulated," anxious? This type of experience is common for children. Indeed, children's growth and learning have been described as "a voyage into the unknown."

Children are also affected by the stress others in the family are experiencing. Parents who are stressed may not have the energy, time, or inclination to attend to their children. Or they may be cheerless, irritable, and short-tempered. When parents or siblings experience stress, children may feel especially insecure. At such times, they need reassurance that they are not to blame and that their world is not going to crumble down around their heads.

Coping With Stress

What can you do to help your children deal with stress and stress-producing situations?

- Be sure they have good nourishment, plenty of rest, and sufficient exercise. These three factors often can help prevent the body from falling prey to stress and can aid in recovery from stress-related illnesses.
- Listen to your children's concerns and feelings — without judging, criticizing, or giving advice. One of the most helpful tactics for coping with stress is talking out one's problems, worry, and feelings. It helps relieve tensions, puts the situation in a clearer light, and often helps a

person — even a child — see what can be done about it. Adults frequently fail to take children's concerns seriously enough to listen with full and undivided attention. Yet that's precisely what is needed.

- Help your child understand the situation through simple but clear communication. Explain in an honest and matter-of-fact manner what is happening or will happen. If children do not have the facts, their imagination can exaggerate reality, causing undue stress. Keep answering your child's questions, which may recur for some period of time. It may take time for a child to digest the facts and work through the situation.
- Recognize that problem behavior, clinging, whining, general irritability, and crying during stressful times are common. Neither punish nor reward such behavior. Instead, try to redirect the child's valid feelings of hurt, anger, sorrow, or anxiety. Sometimes exercise or other vigorous activity can help a child find release from anxiety. Most important, accept your child and don't withhold your love.
- Make an extra effort to give your child ample doses of attention and nurturance — including cuddling, holding, and touching.

Luckily, youngsters are remarkably flexible and resilient, and will usually adjust to a new situation in a short time. But they do need help and emotional support from the adults in their lives to prevent minor difficulties and stresses from mushrooming into larger problems or chronic conditions.

Ronald L. Pitzer
 Extension Family Life Specialist

Home Energy Savings

Here are some tips for cutting your home heating bills.

Weatherstrip and caulk, especially interior joints, cracks, and holes. Install electrical outlet and switch gaskets as well as electrical plug covers. Seal window pulley holes.

Install inexpensive clear plastic film over window frames.

Lower your thermostat to the lowest possible setting and wear warm clothes for comfort. Lower the thermostat more when no one is at home. Be aware, however, that frozen plumbing risks increase with lower temperatures, especially when pipes are located near outdoor walls.

Insulate your attic, sidewalls, and basement. This work can generally be done in the winter.

Cut water-heating costs by taking smaller baths, shorter showers, or installing a flow restrictor in the shower head.

Check the temperature setting on your water heater. A setting of high will heat water to about 160° F. This is wasteful and dangerous for small children. A temperature setting of normal will heat water to about 140° F. This is needed for all dishwashers except those with water-heating features. The low setting on a water heater will heat water to about 120° F.

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Children & Money: Choices

Most of us cannot afford to buy all the things we want, so we must make choices. Children, too, must learn to make choices in spending their money.

As soon as preschoolers are past the stage of putting small objects into their mouths, they can begin learning about money. Playing with a few washed coins will help a young child notice differences in size and color. Playing store with empty boxes and cans will give a child experience in choosing items and paying for them.

Give young children a few coins to take to the store and let them choose a toy. Allow plenty of time for the child to compare two or three items and to discuss the merits of each one. When children choose an item, support the decision and praise them for considering the alternatives before deciding.

Let your preschool child choose food in a restaurant, limiting the choice to two or three selections. As the child deals successfully with a limited number, expand the choices.

At ages six to eight, children are ready for an allowance that covers needs and spending money. Learning to live within a regular income will encourage children to make wise buying choices. Before a shopping trip with your child, discuss needs versus wants. Discuss color, style, price, quality, and upkeep. Planning on a navy sweater to coordinate with several pairs of pants will forestall the purchase of a beautiful orange sweater that will match nothing your child owns. Take enough time at the store to comparison shop. Don't replace misspent money, except in unusual circumstances.

Many commercials on television are aimed at young children. Help them sort out fact from fiction, asking them questions, rather than giving them facts, to help them to make choices themselves. For example, if they see a game advertised on TV, ask them such questions as: How many people are required to play that exciting-looking game? How long will it last? Is it actually as big or as fast as shown on TV?

Many learning experiences are available at the grocery store, if you can go when the store isn't crowded. Children aged six to eight can find coupon items themselves. Discuss the choices you make. Do you save money with the coupon item compared with a generic or store-brand item? How do you decide which head of lettuce to buy or which brand of detergent? Let your child begin to choose some items.

Don't expect children to master shopping skills in one lesson. Repeat the experiences often, structuring them so there is a good chance for your child to succeed. Be liberal in praise of your child's progress.

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Lead-Based Paint

A home should provide protection from the elements and a safe, healthful environment for your family. Unfortunately, homes may contain pollutants, including asbestos, carbon monoxide, and formaldehyde. One pollutant that poses a particular risk for young children is lead.

Children under age seven are especially at risk for lead poisoning because they are more likely to put nonfood items in their mouths. Moreover, young children who are nutritionally or emotionally deprived may develop a habit of consuming nonfood items such as paint chips, dirt, or newspaper, which may contain lead.

Children who eat even small amounts of these lead-based items may get lead poisoning. Usually there are no obvious signs, or the symptoms may seem like those of other childhood diseases: stomach aches, vomiting, headaches, loss of appetite, crankiness, or tiredness. More serious consequences of lead poisoning include mental retardation, blindness, paralysis, even death. If you suspect that your child has eaten paint chips, dirt, or newspaper, consult your doctor about a blood test for lead.

If you live in an older home containing cracked, peeling, or blistering paint, your children may be exposed to lead. Federal regulations restricting the lead in paint were not enacted until 1971, and so chances are that older homes contain lead-based paint. One way to reduce the risk is to remove such paint, especially if it is peeling or blistering. Repainting without removal covers the lead, but does not eliminate it, so it is still essential to keep young children from eating paint particles.

Removal of leaded paint can be costly and possibly dangerous. It is safer to scrape or brush off loose paint. Sanding may produce poisonous dust. Softening leaded paint with heat creates a fire hazard as well as producing lead fumes. Sweeping floors clear of paint chips or dust is simple but most important.

Dirt may also contain lead, especially in neighborhoods near heavily travelled roads or highways where vehicles burn leaded gasoline. To protect your children, make sure they do not put dirt in their mouths.

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This Issue

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