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Children and Stress

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Stress is a life event or situation that causes imbalance in a child's life. An unhealthy response to stress occurs when the demands of the stressor exceed the child's coping ability. Stress shows itself in children in complaints about stomach aches, nervousness, trouble sleeping, anger and infections.

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 under stress react by exhibiting irritability, anxiety, uncontrollable crying, trembling with fright and eating or sleep problems. **Toddlers** may regress to infant behaviors, feel angry and not understand their feelings, fear being alone or without their parent, withdraw, bite, or be 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 head or stomach aches, have trouble sleeping, have a loss of appetite, or need to urinate frequently.

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 rebelling and breaking all of the rules, and taking part in high-risk behaviors (drugs, alcohol, shoplifting, 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 could be masterful at considering options, finding compromise solutions, or finding substitute comfort. Usually a child's thinking is not fully developed enough to think of options or think

about the results of possible actions. Children who live in supportive environments and develop a range of coping strategies become more resilient. **Resiliency** is the ability to bounce back from stress and crisis. Many children do not have a supportive environment and do not learn to cope with stress.

Factors That Support Children and Create a Safety Net:

- A healthy relationship with at least one parent or close adult.
- Well-developed social skills.
- Well-developed problem-solving skills.
- Ability to act independently
- At least one coping strategy.
- A sense of positive self-esteem and personal responsibility.
- Religious commitment.
- Ability to focus attention.
- Special interests and hobbies.

Families Can Provide Protection By:

- Developing trust, particularly during the first year of life.
- Being supportive
- Showing caring and warmth
- Having high, clear expectations without being overly rigid
- Providing ways for children to contribute to the family in meaningful ways (involvement in family decisions, chores, etc.)
- Being sensitive to family cultural beliefs
- Building on family strengths

Coping Strategies. It is not necessary to be a therapist to help children cope with stress. One key element in reducing stress is a **low-stress environment**, which is based on social support, having the ability to find hope by thinking through solutions, and being able to anticipate stress and learn new ways to avoid it.

Social support means having people to lean on during difficult times. Parents who listen, friends to talk to, hugs, and help in thinking through solutions are ways children feel support. Specifically:

- **Notice them.** Well-developed observation skills are essential. Observe for more quarrels with playmates, poor concentration, or bed-wetting.
- **Praise them.** Encourage children and show you care. Be positive.
- **Acknowledge feelings.** Let children know it is OK to feel angry, alone, scared, or lonely. Give children the names for their feelings and words to express how they are feeling.
- **Have children view the situation more positively.** Some stressors make the child feel ashamed. Shaming affects self-esteem.
- **Structure activities for cooperation, not competition.** This allows individuals to go at their own pace and increases the learning of social skills.
- **Involve parents, family members and friends.** They can read books together, encouraging openness and listening. They also can ensure good nutrition and proper rest.
- **Host regular, safe talks.** Members of the family or others who feel comfortable can share experiences, fears, and feelings. Adults can recognize the steps a child uses to cope and help others learn from these experiences. Hold regular meetings (family, classroom, religious), to plan activities or to suggest solutions.

Thinking It Through Clearly

Children must learn to think through a problem. Some specific strategies include self-talk, writing about the problem and making a plan. Thinking positively and thinking up real solutions is important. Adults can:

- **Show how they can cope in a healthy way.** Keep calm, control anger, think through a plan, and share the plan with the family.
- **Be proactive.** Plan plenty of playtime, inform children about changes, and plan activities where children can play out their feelings. Books, art, puppetry, play and writing help children think through and name their feelings.
- **Develop thinking skills.** Help children think through the consequences of actions. Pose situations (friendship, stealing, emergencies) and think through actions. Ask open-ended questions about what the solutions to problems could include, such as "What could we do about this?"
- **Help children tell reality from fantasy.** A child's behavior, for example, did not cause his or her parents' divorce.
- **As an adult, focus on the stressor.** Model how thinking through options for dealing with difficult people, situations or problems helps you find solutions.
- **Find individual talking time.** Talk about stressful events and everyday events.
- **Use stories and books.** Stories can help the child identify with the feelings of the character and tap their own feelings to ease them out for discussion and to discuss coping strategies.
- **Use art for expressing feelings.** Paint, clay, sand and water all allow for active expression.
- **Encourage children to act out coping skills.** Playing with dolls, boxes, toy telephones, puppets, blocks, cars and similar items provides another avenue to bring feelings out for discussion.
- **Give the child some degree of control.** Children should be allowed to choose within the framework of what is expected. Allow them to make some manageable decisions, such as how to arrange their room, to voice their opinion in some family decisions, which activity to complete.

Foresee Stressful Situations and Avoid Them

If we can foresee an event, we can often block it as a stressor. Ignoring problems, changing the subject, not worrying about it, or changing an action can be coping strategies.

- **Identify what could cause stress** and plan ways to avoid it or deal with it.
- **Encourage children to be proud of themselves** in some way. Developing a special interest or skill can serve as a source of pride and self-esteem.
- **Use gentle humor** or read a silly book to create laughter and to reframe negative thoughts into opportunities.
- **Offer personal space.** Modify the environment. Quiet space and alone time should be allowed. (Adjust noise levels and check the traffic pattern.)
- **Teach relaxation and deep breathing techniques.** Ask children to close their eyes and imagine a quiet and or happy place (the beach with waves, a birthday party, a cup of hot chocolate).
- **Teach conflict resolution strategies.** Teach children to think through alternative ways to solve problems. Who else can help solve given problems? What additional information do they need?

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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