

# STRESS

## Taking Charge

### Sources of stress

#### At school

- being away from home (ages 5 to 7)
- fear of wetting themselves (ages 5 to 7)
- fear of punishment from teacher
- worry about getting along with peers
- worry about school work
- fear of being chosen last on any team
- fear of being different from others
- worry about changing bodies (ages 10 to 12)

#### Other major sources of stress

- divorce of parents
- move to new town or city
- being held back in school
- serious illness
- parent being called to war

#### For further reading

Youngs, Bettie. B. (1995) *Stress and Your Child: Helping Kids Cope with the Strains and Pressures of Life*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

Ask at the local extension office for:  
Pm 1529d, Understanding Children: Fears  
Pm 1529g, Understanding Children:  
Moving to a new home  
Pm 1529h, Understanding Children: Self-esteem  
Pm 1638, Divorce Matters: Talking with children  
Pm 1639, Divorce Matters: A child's view

File: Family life 3

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# Helping Children Manage Stress

*Sue and Tom are worried about eight-year-old Kevin. He complains of stomach aches and often cries when it's time to leave for school. He seems better in the evening but sometimes has trouble falling asleep at night.*

All children feel stress from time to time. Times of change like starting school, getting used to a new baby, or adjusting to a growing body during the preteen years can be difficult. Problems at home like conflict, illness, or divorce can cause stress. Problems at school with the teacher, other children, or schoolwork also can create stress.

You can help your child handle new or frustrating situations and teach ways of managing stress that will be valuable throughout his or her life.

## Stress Symptoms

Notice some of the following signs of child stress.

- Physical—headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, wetting
- Emotional—fear, irritability, sadness
- Behavioral—crying, nervous tics, losing temper
- Interactions with others—withdrawing, teasing or bullying, extreme shyness

Signs of stress in children often occur together, but no one child shows all symptoms at once. A fearful or sad child may get stomach aches and may cry, withdrawing from others. Another may become irritable when under stress, teasing siblings or peers and losing his or her temper. Stress reactions can occur anywhere. In school a stressed child may be easily distracted, have difficulty following directions or completing assignments, or have trouble concentrating.

## Differences in Children

Children react differently to stress. Some seem to be born with easy-going personalities. From infancy, they take life in stride, getting along with others and adjusting to changes. Other children are upset easily, being bothered by new situations and routines as well as more challenging events. Children's personalities develop from what they inherit genetically and from the environment in which they grow up. You cannot change characteristics your children inherited, but there are many ways for them to learn to manage stress.

## Helping a Child Who Holds Feelings In

A child who holds stress in may try very hard to be good, working extra hard in school and making few demands on adults. This child may be a worrier, have low self-esteem, or be fearful, shy, or prone to cry easily. Physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches or frequent illnesses are common in children who internalize stress.

*Seven-year-old Amber complained of stomach aches during the weeks before second grade started in the fall. Barb, her mother, noticed that Amber wasn't sleeping well and worried that she might be getting sick. After a visit to the family doctor who said Amber was healthy, Barb began to suspect that Amber's stomach aches and sleeplessness might be from worry about school starting. One night when Barb was tucking Amber in, she told her a story that helped her feel less nervous.*

*"Once upon a time there was a very scared little girl named Abby. She was worried about going to school with a new teacher. Someone told Abby that the new teacher wasn't very nice so Abby thought that school wasn't going to be much fun. She also was afraid that she wouldn't be in the same class with her best friend. She worried and tried to think of some way to not go to school. But Abby's mother went with her on the first day and together they met the new teacher, Miss Johnson. She was nice and Abby knew that school might not be*

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so bad. Then she saw her best friend, Jennifer, coming in the door and she felt even better. That day after school, Abby came home and told her mom, 'I like second grade! It's going to be even better than first.'"

Over the weeks before school Barb made up new stories to help Amber anticipate what to expect. Some nights Amber even helped tell the story. Little by little the stomach aches got better. On the day school started, Amber was a little nervous but Barb believed that the storytelling helped prepare her daughter for a new experience.

### Helping a Child Who Acts Out

Children who show stress by letting it out may lose their tempers easily, become demanding or destructive, or may tease or bully other children. Research shows that under high-stress situations boys tend to become more aggressive and disruptive, while girls become anxious or depressed. However, you may notice that your son has tendencies toward being fearful or depressed, or that your daughter is aggressive or destructive.

Sue and Kevin were concerned over problems 10-year-old Jeremy was having at school. He was getting C's and D's instead of the usual B's and C's and his teacher had called about Jeremy's fighting with others at recess. Sue and Kevin also noticed that he teased his younger sister more than usual. When they were called in to school after another playground incident, Jeremy's parents decided to do something. They sat down with Jeremy to talk about what was going on. At first he didn't want to talk but after some gentle prodding, Jeremy told them that he had been mad ever since soccer had started last fall. He felt that the coach wasn't fair and didn't like him. Next, his parents helped Jeremy see how other kids might feel when he picked on them or bullied. Then they worked with him to help him learn ways of dealing with his anger such as walking away from a stressful situation or counting to 100. Jeremy's dad agreed to work with him on soccer so he would feel better about his skills. Last, Kevin and Sue told Jeremy that they would check back with him and his teacher each week to see if things were getting better for him at school.

How can parents tell if the child who is either withdrawn or aggressive is showing signs of stress, or simply expressing his or her natural personality? The key is *change*. For example, a generally outgoing and friendly child who becomes sad, withdrawn, or fearful probably is showing signs of stress. Similarly, a quiet and easy-going child who becomes irritable or aggressive may be stressed. As a parent you may or may not know what triggered your child's stress reaction.

### Resilient Children

Ann Masten and her colleagues reviewed research showing that certain characteristics in the child, family, and community help that child bounce back in the face of stressful events and situations. They include

- a loving relationship with at least one adult
- belief in one's own effectiveness
- ability to assist the family
- belief that he or she is lovable and worthwhile
- connections to adults outside the immediate family
- effective problem solving
- belief in ability to make things better for himself/herself
- spiritual resources

### Coping with Stress

The following ideas show specific things you can do, or help your children do, to manage stress.

- Help your children talk about what is bothering them. Don't force them to talk, but offer opportunities; bedtime or car trips are good times for this. Instead of asking, "What's wrong?" ask questions such as, "How are things going at school with your teacher?" Do not criticize what your children say or they will learn not to tell you things that bother them.
- Encourage vigorous physical activities. If your children do not exercise often, try family activities like bike riding, hiking, or swimming.
- Spend special one-to-one time. Find hobbies or other activities that you can do alone with your child. This

allows for time to talk as well as time for having fun together.

- Encourage healthy eating. Teach your children by words and example that eating a healthy diet makes their bodies better able to handle stress.
- Teach relaxation skills. Show your children how to relax by remembering and imagining pleasant situations like a favorite vacation or happy experience.
- Give back rubs and hugs. A short back or shoulder rub can help your children relax and show them you care. Gentle physical touch is a powerful stress reliever.
- Teach your children that mistakes are OK. Let them know that all people, including you, make mistakes. Mistakes are for learning.
- Be clear about rules and consequences. Let your children know specifically what is expected and together decide on consequences for misbehavior. Then follow through. See ISU Extension publication, *Using Consequences*, Pm 1547a, available at your county extension office.
- Teach ways of handling difficult situations. Talk through and role play with your children how they can handle a stressful situation.
- Tell stories about dealing with stress. For example, if your child is afraid of a new situation, tell a story about how you once felt in a similar situation and what you did to cope, or find a library book that shows a child coping successfully with stress.
- Be a role model for your children in handling your own stress in a healthy way. If your children see you talking to others about problems, taking time to relax, and living a healthy lifestyle, your example is likely to rub off.

Whether your child is feeling stress from a normal everyday stressor or from something out of the ordinary, you can help him or her cope with stress reactions. Life brings stress. It's how you handle it that makes all the difference. Whether your children hold their stress in or show stress by misbehaving, you can show them effective stress management techniques.