

Stress Management for Children Promotes Good Mental Health



by Karen Stephens

Children face stress daily. When a child successfully copes with age-appropriate stress, it builds confidence. However, inappropriate or unrelenting stress overwhelms and disables children. It undermines their emotional, intellectual health, and even physical fitness.

When stress is unmanageable or threatening, a child's brain signals the release of particular stress-related hormones. A constant flood of those hormones reduces a child's ability to control impulsive behavior and maintain emotional self-control. And the hormonal chemicals keep information from processing along brain networks, thus interfering with learning ability. Stressed children's muscles throughout their body become chronically tense, often leading to head, neck, and shoulder aches. Excessive stress interferes with kids' ability to relax or even eat and sleep properly.

Stress will always be a part of life, so it's wise to help kids learn to manage it positively during childhood. To do that, children should remain "in touch" with what soothes their mind and soul. And they should develop coping skills so they can handle stress when it becomes intense. Below, I offer ideas for both stress management and relaxation.

Helping Children Manage Stress

- Become sensitive to events that stress children, such as change in typical daily routine or familiar environment. And remember, even "fun" things can be stressful, such as a birthday party or vacation.
- Calmly discuss issues or events that may create stress. Help children anticipate when a change will occur and ways to respond.
- Give children a chance to talk about their feelings and to ask questions. Be patient, empathetic, and respect their point of view and concerns. Make sure they know you're willing to listen whenever they need you.
- Model realistic optimism and positive coping skills when you encounter stress. Use positive "self-talk." For instance, when frustrated in front of your child, say: "I can do this; it will just take some time." Verbalize your own coping strategies: "I can't get this computer to work; I better check the 'help' menu." When encountering an issue, analyze out loud the pros and cons of options so your child can see and hear the "coping process" in action.
- Read good children's books that relate to a child's stress. A librarian or early childhood professional can recommend books about going to the doctor, having a new sibling, moving, and so on.
- Use pretend play and puppets to "rehearse" upcoming events. If your child has never been to a birthday party before, have one with dolls or Lego® people to help your child anticipate details.
- Prior to a change or stressful event, encourage children to write, tell, or draw a story of what they think *might* happen. This will give you a view into your child's perceptions and feelings. After hearing your child's story, you can confirm information that's correct. More importantly, you can also clarify

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misconceptions that may be causing your child unnecessary concern. For instance, a child facing hospitalization for corrective leg surgery may silently worry that his leg will be cut off. If allowed to verbalize this, parents or a doctor can provide invaluable reassurance by explaining the actual surgical process in child-friendly terms.

- Keep caregivers and teachers informed of your child's stressful situation so they can provide support for children, too.
- And finally, when a child's behavior or comments reveal excessive stress, seek assistance from others. Prolonged periods of childhood stress may require consultations among teachers, parents, extended family, doctor, social worker, or a psychologist.

Relaxation Techniques for Children

Some children naturally know how to relax. Others need prompting to remember calming activities. Listed below are a variety of relaxation ideas to try out with your child. Relaxation techniques are simple and can be used to prevent children's stress as well as help children cope with it.

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- gently blow bubbles
- play with water and sand
- swim
- dance together
- look at books and photo albums
- swap gentle hand, foot, or shoulder massages
- give kids time for warm, unhurried baths
- in a safe spot, take time for slow, rhythmic deep breathing
- gaze at an aquarium
- lay on a knoll to watch butterflies or clouds
- lay in bed listening to windchimes outside
- enjoy hobbies such as sewing or card collecting
- curl up in the security of a "little place" such as under a table covered with a sheet, a corner filled with pillows, or a tree house
- play with play dough and use art materials such as fingerpaints, crayons, watercolors, or textured fabrics for collage
- enjoy some pretend play or puppet play, like playing house or being a zoo keeper
- daydream and enjoy visual imagery (for instance, a small rug can be a magic carpet that flies according to your child's imagination)
- fly kites
- take rides in a wagon
- take evening strolls
- swing or sway in a hammock
- read stories in a lawn chair
- listen to rain on the roof
- visit a park
- watch an anthill
- water flowers or tend a garden
- listen to music or play a lullaby for naps
- dance

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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