

Momentum

Helping youngsters manage stress



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Symptoms of childhood stress

- ✓ Younger children usually don't have the emotional vocabulary to identify their stress. They may express feelings through words such as "worried," "confused" and "angry."
- ✓ Physiological symptoms can include changes in eating habits, headaches, nightmares or other sleep troubles, upset stomach or vague stomach pain, and bedwetting.
- ✓ Behavioral symptoms can include acting irritable or moody, withdrawing from activities, having new or recurrent fears, clinging to a parent or teacher, and showing newly aggressive or stubborn behavior.

Kids get stressed out too

It's common for adults to view the world of children as pretty carefree. However, research suggests that children and teens now face higher levels of stress than prior generations. It's important to tune into their lives and recognize their concerns.

Children don't have to work jobs and pay bills, so could their lives really be so tough? The answer is yes. While anxiety caused by family turmoil and academic pressure has always existed, newer factors have added a layer of difficulty to daily life for kids—including social media, cyberbullying and even the threat of school shootings.

While a limited amount of stress helps children become resilient, or quick to recover, in meeting challenges, excess stress can have serious impacts on their health, well-being and sense of security. Sources of uncomfortable distress can include:

- Multiple challenging responsibilities such as school and work or sports
- Relationship problems with friends, peer group pressures, or bullying
- Changing schools, moving, or dealing with housing problems
- Seeing parents go through a separation or divorce
- Family financial problems

Parents need to recognize when children are struggling, and make changes to reduce their stress levels.

Teaching self-regulating strategies to children—so they learn to gain control of their physiological and emotional stress, and remain calm—can lead to a dramatic drop in both child and parental stress.



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Stress management tips

Try these methods to help reduce uncomfortable levels of stress your child may be facing.

- If your child's after-school activities are causing too much family chaos and homework stress, think about ending an activity.
- Make getting enough sleep a priority. Based on their ages, children need at least nine to 11 hours of sleep per night (with no electronics in the bedroom!). Good sleep supports learning, memory, and the energy needed to be resilient.
- If you notice your child having a bad day, do something simple together like a walk, bike ride, a craft or playing catch. Shared laid-back activities, plus family dinnertime, can lead to helpful communication.
- If you find a specific problem causing your child's stress, brainstorm together for solutions. Encourage him or her to come up with a few ideas. The child's active participation will build confidence.
- Set a good example by letting your child see you effectively dealing with stress. Show them how to breathe deeply and slow down.

Listen closely to their challenges



Pay attention

Although young children are showing more signs of early stress, often parents aren't aware of the link between what's happening in the family and its possibly harmful impact on the kids. Be aware of the symptoms of childhood stress. Look for chances to talk about things that might be bothering your child.



Listen actively

Notice times when your child seems most comfortable talking; for example, before dinner, in the car or at bedtime. Give all of your attention and listen closely. Express interest in what they say without being intrusive. Don't assume what they're going to say. Let them finish expressing themselves before you respond.



Show understanding

Listen to your child's point of view, even if it's something you find difficult to hear. Soften any strong reactions you may have; children may tune you out if you become defensive or angry. Acknowledge their feelings ("I can imagine why you found that so difficult") and show that you care.

Additional sources: American Psychological Association, The MEHRIT Centre, MedlinePlus.gov, KidsHealth.org, WebMD.com.



Webinar—Gain useful parenting skills during our webinar on Wednesday, July 11: *Helping Kids and Teens Recognize and Manage Stress*. Register [here](#).