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Childhood Stress

March 2012

We hope for children that their childhoods consist of carefree, worryless days with comparatively few responsibilities or troubles; yet, studies tell us that many children experience extreme stress and have similar symptoms to those of adults. However, unlike adults, children do not have the means or the skills to understand or manage their stress in appropriate ways.

Both negative and positive events can cause stress. Family events are often a source of stress for children. The breakup of a family or events such as physical abuse, separation, rejection, and fights are some negative sources of stress. Other events such as a parent losing a job, or the death of a parent, grandparent, or sibling can also create stress. Positive events that cause stress in children include birthday parties, new pets, and the birth of new siblings. Everyday family obligations, events, and routines can create stress and tension for a young child; for example, an active family that is so busy, the needs of a young child are overlooked.

Parents and caregivers need to be aware of what is happening in a child's life that may affect the his or her behavior. A sudden change in a child's behavior may be related to stress. A first step in decreasing a child's stress is to be knowledgeable and aware of the symptoms of stress. These symptoms or warning signs include bed-wetting, upset stomach, irritability, nightmares, lying, withdrawal from activity, change in activity level, poor sleep or eating habits, teeth grinding, or decline in school achievement. Recognizing children's stress symptoms is not easy. It is very important to recognize that it is normal for children to exhibit some of these signs at some times in their lives. Adults need to be alert when a child is showing a cluster of these signs or symptoms simultaneously or when no apparent cause can explain why the child may be stressed. In either of these cases, it is a sign that the adults who are involved in the care of children need to intervene. If the child feels that it is impossible to handle the stress, he or she can become angry or aggressive. If the stress becomes too overwhelming for the child, he or she will experience anxiety. If the body remains in a prolonged state of anxiety, physical, social, and emotional damage and deterioration can occur.

The age of the child also is a factor in recognizing stress. Children react differently to stressful events and situation, and also have different coping strategies. Children can cope through tears and crying, through tantrums, or by retreating from unpleasant situations. Children who are around supportive adults and caregivers usually develop a variety of coping strategies and are more likely to become more resilient. Many children, however, do not have a supportive environment and do not learn positive management strategies.

Children need help in learning to manage and function with the stress they feel. One means to assist children is to acknowledge their feelings. It sounds like a simple concept, but it is important that children understand what they are feeling, that we teach the meaning of the word "stress" by letting them know they may feel "butterflies in the stomach," or their heart may pound. Let children know that it is normal to feel angry, alone, scared, or lonely some of the time. Teach children names or words for their feelings and appropriate ways to express them. Show more interest in the child's experience than in the behavior that results. There are times when a child just needs a hug for reassurance. (more)



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In the case of older children, help them learn to problem solve for themselves and come up with coping strategies. This builds their independence and ability to come up with options, find solutions, or find other ways to comfort themselves.

For example, if a child repeatedly bullies other children, lies, withdraws, gives up, hurts or blames other children, the adult can ask the child to think about other ways to handle the situation that caused the reaction. Promote a positive environment. Praise children for the acceptable things they do. The experience of stress and tension can serve to defeat a child's confidence. Help children see and understand the good in themselves and that they are worthwhile persons. Listen without judging the child or the situation; that is, if the child chooses to tell you about the situation that produced the stress. Help the child feel comfortable in expressing feelings. Be aware of the child's temperament; what seems to be fun for one child may feel overwhelming to another. Make an effort to cut down on activities when you see signs of stress in children's behavior. Allow children to go at their own pace. Teach children tricks for calming themselves, such as taking deep breaths, thinking of a quiet place, etc.

Take care of yourself! Children often pick up stress from parents and caregivers. Plan plenty of time for play. When a negative event takes place, reassure children that what happened was not their fault. Children often believe that their "bad" behavior caused bad things to happen, such as the breakup of their mother and father. They have a tendency to assume guilt for situations that adults know are entirely beyond the child's control. Give children a lot of cuddles, reassurances, and familiar routines, like a bedtime story. Helping children to deal positively with stressful and tension causing events prepares them for healthy emotional and social development. This is an important responsibility of parents, teachers, and other caregivers: to effectively guide and help children throughout development.

Jody Patterson is the director of COMCARE's Children's Services. Jody has been involved with children's mental health programs and services for more than 18 years. She is dedicated to helping children live healthy and productive lives in the community. In addition, Jody is involved in a number of local and state workgroups focused on improving the quality of life for children and their families. If you would like to speak confidentially to a professional about your child, call COMCARE Children's Program at 316-660-7540. COMCARE of Sedgwick County is the licensed Community Mental Health Center for residents of Sedgwick County. *Help is available.*