

An Ounce of Prevention

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Stress In Kids

By Ellen H. Parlapiano - Parents Magazine

Every morning, the stress builds in Sarah Owen's home as she races to get her three girls off to day care and school. "I'm overwhelmed by having so much on my plate, and I'm constantly yelling, "Hurry," "Let's go!" Even before we're out the door, I'm upset and so are they," says the Trinity, North Carolina, mom. One day, she was trying to clean the kitchen as her 2-year old, LeighAnna, pulled on her leg and screamed. "I finally reached my limit and slammed the cabinet door," she remembers. "The next day, LeighAnna, was playing and couldn't get the dress off her baby doll. She got mad and slammed the cabinet door, just like I did. I feel as if I'm teaching her all the wrong ways to manage frustration."

No parent is perfect, and we all have bad days. But if you're frequently feeling frazzled, it's likely that your children are too-especially if they're preschool age or younger, when they're still developing strategies to calm themselves. What's worse, you could be setting your kids up for a lifetime of anxiety overload. "The greatest predictor of how a child handles stress is the way his parents deal with it," says Edward Christophersen, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital, in Kansas City, Missouri.

Young children look to their parents to signal that the world is secure and to model coping strategies for when life gets tough, explains Yvonne Gustafson, Ph.D., parent consultant for Riverside Methodist Hospital's Elizabeth Blackwell Centre, in Columbus, Ohio. "Kids need to know that Mommy and Daddy aren't too upset to keep them safe. "Otherwise children can become unusually anxious about their own challenges, such as potty-training or starting preschool. There's a lot of talk these days about kids being overscheduled, but children are not feeling stressed because they're doing too many activities, notes Georgia Witkin, Ph.D., director of the stress program at Mount Sinai Medical Center, in New York City. Rather, they're affected by the way that juggling all those activities overwhelms their parents.

And the side effects of stress are not just psychological. "Stress can have serious implications for kids' health," says David Marks, M.D., author of *Raising stable Kids in an Unstable World*. Experts estimate that one in three American children suffers from stress-related symptoms like headaches or stomachaches, and studies have found that over-anxious kids have lower levels of virus-fighting antibodies in their upper respiratory tracts, making them more vulnerable to colds and flu, he says. Stress can also trigger and worsen asthma, diabetes, and other chronic illnesses in kids who are already prone to them.

Stressed Parents, Anxious Kids

Surprisingly, parental stress can have a negative effect on a child right from the start. Even an infant can sense tension and anxiety in her mom or dad. Of course, some babies are simply more high-strung than others, and genetics and temperament play a big part in determining your child's stress threshold. But a mild-mannered infant often reacts to a parent's anxiety by becoming fussy and hard to soothe. "You can transfer tension to your baby through touch, gesture, and tone of voice," says K. Mark Sossin, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Pace University, in New York City. Stressed parents who are preoccupied with their own problems may be unable to connect to kids emotionally or comfort them when they're unhappy. "And babies who haven't been comforted don't develop that internal capacity to soothe themselves."

As your child grows into a toddler and preschooler, you might be more impatient with him on days when you're overwhelmed. That makes kids anxious and insecure-which can in turn heighten your stress. Lorie Mitchell, of Carlsbad, New Mexico, says she often lost her cool with her toddler son when her husband, Larry, battled a serious illness several years ago. Alex, who was 3 years old, picked up the habit of yelling back and deliberately destroying things in the house, and he pulled away from his mom to bond more closely with his dad. "Tension is passed from parent to child, and from child back to parent, and it quickly becomes a negative spiral," Dr. Sossin says. Children may believe that they are the reason you are upset, and start concealing their feelings or withdrawing from you.

Spotting the Signs

Stress often goes unnoticed because kids under the age of 5 can't put complex feelings into words. That's why it's important to pay attention to signals that your child is under too much pressure.

Watch for unusual behavior

Whining, tantrums, nightmares, fearfulness, and separation anxiety are typical in the toddler and preschool years. But if they happen more frequently, or if there's a significant change in behavior or personality, stress could be a problem, says David J. Schonfeld, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics and child study at Yale University School of Medicine, in New Haven, Connecticut. Your child may seem irritable, aggressive, or withdrawn, or she may develop sleep difficulties, appetite loss, or nervous habits. She might also regress in language or social skills. Stomachaches, headaches, and vague complaints of "I feel sick" can also signal stress

Keep a log

Chart any symptoms that you suspect are triggered by anxiety, and record where and when they happen. Then think about what could be causing the problem. A big lifestyle change like a new baby or a move? A traumatic event like a divorce or a death in the family? When Gina Ritter and her husband were having marital problems, her 4-year old son, Taylor, became more fearful and clingy, especially after hearing his parent's argue. Once the Corning, New York, couple separated, Taylor became more insecure and insisted on checking on family members in the middle of the night.

Take action

In addition to tracing your child's troublesome behavior, talk to her pediatrician, and get input from teachers or day-care providers. Armed with this information, you can often deal with the problem at home; however, if a child becomes hyper vigilant and seems constantly worried about danger, he could need help from a mental-health professional. Finally, reassure kids that you are doing everything possible to keep them safe and secure. Gina Ritter was able to calm Taylor's fears and reduce his stress about the divorce by telling him daily how much she and his dad love him. She and her ex-husband also agreed to discuss volatile issues privately.

Stopping the stress spiral

Kids will feel more control over their lives if they see that you have a handle on yours. So make sure that your reactions to stress aren't affecting your children. Do you frequently yell when you're feeling frustrated? Or are you able to model more mature ways of keeping yourself together? "If you slam the door or throw down keys after a crummy day, you're teaching your child a negative way of dealing with pressures," Dr. Gustafson says. But if you go for a walk or meditate, you demonstrate a positive way to manage bad moods. Figure out what you can do to minimize your own stress levels. Perhaps you can delegate some of the housework, prepare school lunches the night before to cut down on the morning chaos, or cuddle with the kids briefly before starting dinner. Consider taking a yoga or Tai Chi class to reduce work stress; if you're having marital problems, get counseling. When you feel your anger mounting, give yourself a time-out or count to ten to avoid losing control.

And while it is fine, and even healthy, to let your children know that you're feeling stressed, be careful not to fall apart or overload them with your emotions or fears. Children shouldn't feel as if they have to comfort you or solve the problem for you, Dr. Sossin says. Show them how you move on with our life by saying things like "I was sad, but I'm okay now. Let's go get ready for dinner" or "I had a bad day at work, but I know I'll feel better after a walk. Do you want to come?" Simple steps like these can change a child's life, experts agree. And the tools are in your hands.

What is Stress?

"Stress is the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it".

Dr. Hans Selye – Father of stress theory

What defines a demand?

The "demand" can be a threat, a challenge or any kind of a change that requires the body to adapt.

The "threat" can be real or imagined.

The response is automatic, immediate and generalized.

It is usually perceived as feeling tense, nervous, uptight or anxious.

The stress reaction is mediated by adrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones. It is also called "The Fight or Flight Response:

What happens during a stress reaction?

There is an increase in:

- Heart rate
- Blood pressure
- Breathing rate
- Perspiration
- Mental alertness and senses are heightened
- Blood flow to the brain, heart and muscles
- Blood sugar, cholesterol, platelets and clotting factors

There is a decrease in:

- Blood flow to the skin
- Blood flow to the digestive tract
- Blood flow to the kidneys
- Stress is necessary to life and survival. It can be positive and beneficial (eustress) or it can be negative and detrimental (distress)

Parenting Corner

Helping Children Cope with Trauma

<http://www.aftertheinjury.org/>

A web site designed for parents whose child has experienced a Pediatric injury.

Search: To Get Help from a Little Kid, Ask the Right Way

Search: Four in 10 Infants Lack Strong Parental Attachments

Search: Talking To Your Child After You Yell

Mobile Apps

MyRoutine: Vanderbilt App Helps Children Manage Their Health Care Routines

Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful:

Search: EMDR – 20/20 Report

Search: 11 Habits Of People Who Never Worry

Search: The Well Quiz: Can You Read People's Emotions?

Self-Help Corner:

City of Edmonton Community Resources: 211

Support Network / Distress Line: 780-482-HELP

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868