Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents

Concerns over changes in family circumstances, such as those caused by financial strain or a faltering economy, can cause stress. Children can be affected directly by changes in their family's financial circumstances or stress they see in their parents, or more indirectly by general anxiety over problems they hear and read about in the news. Children look first and foremost to their parents and other significant adults to gauge the seriousness of their concerns. The following guidance can help adults help children cope with anxiety or stress.

What is Stress?

Everyone is affected by stress and reacts to it in different ways. Stress is a way that our body responds to the demands made upon us by the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of those demands. We all experience both "good stress" and "bad stress." Good stress is that optimal amount of stress that results in our feeling energized and motivated to do our best work. Good stress encourages us to develop effective coping strategies to deal with our challenges, which ultimately contributes to our resilience. Bad stress occurs when our coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by the stress and we do not function at our best. The same event can affect children and adults in very individual ways—one person may see a carnival ride as thrilling and another may see it as a major stressor. Stress can become distress when we are unable to cope or when we believe that we do not have the ability to meet the challenge. The solution is to adapt, change, and find methods to turn that bad stress into good stress.

Causes of Stress

•At School. Stress can come from an unstructured classroom, unclear or unreasonable expectations, or fear of failure.

•At Home. Stress can occur through a lack of family routines, overscheduling, prolonged or serious illness, poor nutrition, change in the family situation, financial problems, family strife or abuse, or unclear or unreasonable expectations.

•Peer-related. Stress can be a result of changing school buildings, having to deal with a bully, trying to fit in with the crowd, or moving to a new community.

Stress tends to be additive in nature and with children can result in inappropriate behaviors, academic difficulties, or health problems. Parents can usually look back over recent events and see the causes of the behavior through the building of stressful situations.

Symptoms of Stress in Children

•Irritability or unusual emotionality or volatility.

•Sleep difficulty or nightmares.

•Inability to concentrate.

•Drop in grades or other functioning.

•Toileting or eating concerns.

•Headaches or stomachaches.

•Unexplained fears or increased anxiety (that also can take the form of clinging).

•Regression to earlier developmental levels.

•Isolation from family activities or peer relationships.

•Drug or alcohol experimentation

Factors that Help Prevent Stress

•Positive problem solving and coping skills.

•Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults.

•Clear expectations.

•Permission and ability to learn from mistakes.

•Consistent, positive discipline.

•Developing competencies (academic, social, extracurricular, and life skills).

•Ability to express feelings appropriately.

•Feeling physically and emotionally safe.

•Good nutrition and exercise.

•Time to relax or do recreational activities.

How Parents Can Help

•Build trust with your child.

•Be available and open to talk when your child is ready. If family circumstances are contributing to the stress, be willing to answer questions honestly and calmly.

•Encourage the expression of feelings.

•Teach and model good emotional responses.

•Encourage your child to tell you if he or she feels overwhelmed.

•Encourage healthy and diverse friendships.

•Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.

•Teach your child to problem solve.

•Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes, in an age-appropriate way.

•Acknowledge that change can feel uncomfortable but reassure him or her that the family will be okay.

•Do not hide the truth from your child. Children sense parents' worry and the unknown can be scarier than the truth. However, avoid unnecessary discussions in front of your child (particularly a young child) of events or circumstances that might increase his or her stress.

•Help your child have a part in decision-making when appropriate.

•Remind your child of his or her ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends.

•Monitor television programs that could worry your child and pay attention to the use of computer games, movies, and the Internet.

•Use encouragement and natural consequences when poor decisions are made.

•Help your child select appropriate extracurricular activities and limit overscheduling.

•Make your child aware of the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol before experimentation begins.

•Monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.

•Contact your child's teacher with any concerns and make them part of the team available to assist your child.

•Seek the assistance of a physician, school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker if stress continues to be a concern.

Adapted from: "Stress in Children: Strategies for Parents and Educators," by Ellis P. Copeland, in Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, NASP. The full handout is available online at http://www.nasponline.org/families.