

## Children and Stress

How your child reacts to stress depends upon both your child and the source of stress. Many children have survived catastrophes without permanent emotional or psychological damage, while other children cannot easily adjust to less traumatic experiences. The personality of the child, as well as available support from family members, plays a major role in the child's ability to handle stressful situations.

### Recognizing Stress in Your Child

Stress is a physical tension of the mind and body which must be released for survival. Stress becomes a problem when pressure builds up to a point where the person can no longer adjust to changes in life. Releasing stress can be done in numerous ways which affect the child physically, emotionally and behaviorally.

Recognizing stress reactions in children is not always easy. Even if you regularly discuss issues with your children, you may discover that they are slow to talk about problems which trouble them. Children think the world revolves around them; therefore, they sometimes feel they cause events. Often these events are not positive and the children end up feeling misplaced guilt. Children may be scared or embarrassed to mention problems or negative feelings, especially if life at home is unsettled. You must not depend on words alone to signal when your child is upset. A child often will deny being troubled. Changes in behavior and personality are better signs of stress overload in children.

At times it may seem that children live in separate worlds of play and fantasy. Do not be fooled into believing that your children are not aware of changes taking place. Your children will not be protected or spared from any stress by being uninformed about major family events or crises. Children are talented at seeing and hearing matters from which they are supposed to be shielded.

Although children may recognize family events or crises and even be aware of global issues like the nuclear arms race, they do not have the same

resources as adults for dealing with the resulting stress. There are several developmental reasons for this:

- \* Children do not have mature reasoning skills;
- \* They lack an accurate understanding of cause and effect; and
- \* They have not had the chance to become skilled at handling stress.

### Natural Disasters

Your child can be prepared for handling emergencies such as a fire, storm or other disaster. Teach him or her basic safety and emergency rules. Many community agencies often hold first aid courses for children. Look into them for your child.

### What Parents Can Do to Help Reduce Stress

Promoting a stress-free lifestyle can help children feel competent and self-confident, traits that inspire success in life and in learning. The biggest stress reducer for children is good parenting. Children become resilient and acquire the skills to bounce back from stressful situations. Parents can help create resiliency in children by taking the following steps:

- Be sensitive to the child's feelings and let him/her know that you recognize that he/she has a problem.
- Be prepared to protect the child from the stressor.
- Show signs of affection such as hugs and more hugs.
- Spend time with your child to foster a healthy and supportive family relationship.
- Learn and teach the child anger management and conflict resolution skills.
- Include laughter, fun, meditation and exercise in the child's daily life.

- Put as much order and consistency in the child's life as possible.
  - Have realistic expectations for your child.
  - Reassure the child that all kids have pressures and fears and he/she is not alone.
  - Let your child express his/her feelings.
  - Provide a spiritual or religious base for the child.
  - Use non-punitive methods of discipline.
  - Help the child build friendships that support him/her.
  - Encourage healthy patterns of eating and sleeping.
  - Teach relaxation and meditation techniques.
  - Encourage daily physical activity.
- Signs of stress in children should be taken seriously, because stress can lead to problems in school and can affect a child's social and cognitive development.

Adapted from Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, West Lafayette, IN. Joanne Samarzija, Child Development and Family Studies, and Judith A. Myers-Walls, Extension Specialist, Human Development.