

Maintaining Healthy Levels of Stress in Your Children

While some amount of stress is normal and should be expected, an overwhelming amount of stress can be unhealthy and quickly take a toll on a child's developing mind and body. Children can begin experiencing stress at a very early age and are often more vulnerable to it than adults because they have not yet learned effective ways of coping. You can help your child develop the skills needed to manage stress in a healthy way. By doing so, you will also reduce the risk of them drinking alcohol underage, engaging in other risky behaviors, or developing a behavioral health disorder.

All children react differently to stress. Signs of stress often occur together, but no one child shows all symptoms at once. Here are a few symptoms you might notice in your child:

- ✓ **Physical:** headaches, stomachaches, body aches, vomiting, bed wetting
- ✓ **Emotional:** fear, irritability, sadness, moodiness, expressing worries
- ✓ **Behavioral:** crying, nervous tics, losing temper, sleeping too much or too little, irregular appetite
- ✓ **Interactions with Others:** withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure, teasing or bullying, extreme shyness

All children feel stress from time to time, but there are some significant life events or changes that can increase stress levels.

- Being away from home (may peak between ages 5 to 7)
- Fear of wetting themselves (may peak between ages 5 to 7)
- Fear of consequences from teacher
- Conflict in peer relationships
- Worry about school work
- Concern about changing bodies (may peak between ages 10 to 12)
- Divorce of parents
- Adjusting to a new baby
- Moving to a new home, town or city
- Switching schools
- Being held back in school
- Serious illness
- Parent being called for deployment

Here are five tips to assist in keeping your child's stress levels in check:

1

Help Your Child Slow Down

Extracurricular activities have many benefits, but overscheduling can have negative effects. Children need downtime to relax and recharge and their brains need time to rest. A great way to know if your children are overscheduled is to pay attention to family meals. If everyone is eating on the run or in the car, there might be too much going on.

2

Encourage Enjoyable Exercise

Beyond the physical health benefits of exercise, there are many emotional health benefits as well. Exercise releases feel-good endorphins that relieve stress, promote an overall feeling of well-being, and contributes to more restful sleep. Encourage your children to participate in physical activities through organized sports or as a family.

3

Make Sleep a Priority

Without the proper amount of sleep, stress can increase and cause your child to be more irritable, less alert, and have trouble concentrating or making good decisions. Create an environment that facilitates sleep by having a bedtime routine and keeping electronics and televisions out of the bedroom.

Recommended Sleep Based on Age

- School-aged (5 to 10): 10 to 11 hours
- Tweens/Teens (11 to 17): 8 ½ to 9 ¼ hours
- Adults (18+): 7 to 9 hours

4

Help Them Eat Well

Children need nourishment to function well throughout the day. This means eating breakfast and not skipping meals, regularly incorporating fruits and vegetables in their diet, and making sure they are staying hydrated by drinking plenty of water.

5

Keep Your Child Talking

Bottled-up, negative emotions can wreak havoc on a child's thought process, leading to poor choices with dangerous consequences. Encourage your children to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or challenges either with you or a trusted friend, teacher or counselor.

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