

## Kids Feel Stress Too!

By Nicole Schwarz, MA, LMFT

There is no doubt that you feel stressed. Your in-box is full of “urgent” requests. The dishes from last night are still in the sink. There is a stack of bills yet to be paid. With all of that pressure, it’s easy to overlook the fact that your children may be feeling stressed, too.

Chances are, some of the events that leave you feeling stressed at the end of the day are also causing your child to feel stressed. Divorce, job loss, moving, and financial difficulties affect even the youngest member of the family. Children also may be stressed by starting a new school or having difficulty managing homework assignments.

Children often show signs of stress through behavioral changes. A normally outgoing child may become shy or avoidant. They may experience headaches, stomachaches, or begin wetting the bed again. Other children may show increased signs of irritability, aggression or crying. Still others may show changes in eating or sleeping patterns. Take a minute to think about any recent changes in your child’s behavior. Do any of these changes line up with big changes in your family or your child’s life? Does your child complain about a certain teacher or class at school? If you can identify a circumstance that may be a source of stress, great! If not, there are still steps that you can take to help your child deal with stress.

1. First of all, **listen** to your children. Next time your child expresses a desire to quit the team or states that his homework is “too hard,” stop yourself from responding immediately. It is easy to respond by saying “You signed up for the team, so you have to finish the season,” or “Stop complaining about homework—it’s not that bad.” Instead, try reflecting back what they are saying. For example: “It sounds like you want to quit the team. What’s up?” Or if your child needs more encouragement to communicate, you may want to give some suggestions, like “Which part of your homework is giving you the most trouble—the reading?” By opening up the conversation, you have the opportunity to help the child come up with solutions to the problem.
2. Next, **practice skills** before stressful events. If your child has a dentist appointment next week, then, depending on the age of your child, it may be beneficial to talk about the visit ahead of time. For example, you can explain that the child will need to lie back in the dentist chair and open his or her mouth. Talk about things your child can do during that time—listening to music, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, etc. Encourage your child to lie on the couch at home and practice these skills. Practicing ahead of time gives kids the confidence they may need when they are in the situation.
3. **Relaxation** is another skill you can promote. This is a tricky one for parents who are stressed, because most of us do not implement these techniques into our own lives. However, the use of relaxation techniques can be a positive learning experience for both parents and kids. The most basic form of relaxation is deep breathing. One way to help your child identify a “deep breath” is to hold up five fingers and ask the child to “blow out the candles.” Demonstrate this by taking a deep breath in and letting a slow, steady breath out. Encourage the child to try, when he or she blows on your fingers, to

drop one finger down—as if the candle went out. Now, encourage the child to blow on the other four fingers! After practicing this a number of times when your child is calm, encourage him to take a deep breath before doing something difficult or when he or she is upset.

4. Make use of **Positive Self Talk**. Again, this is another suggestion that is easier said than done for some parents. However, if you can practice with your child when things are calm, the skills will transfer to more stressful events. If your child is anxious about tests, help her write a few affirmations (“I am confident in my knowledge of this subject.” “I am calm before and during tests.”) on a piece of paper and hang it on the mirror for her to read the week before a big test. Rather than saying “I know you can do it,” or “I’m proud of you,” use your words to fill her head with positive self-talk: “You look so confident right now,” or “Wow! You really studied hard for the test today!”
5. For some children **Exercise** is a great stress reliever. Encourage your child to get regular exercise throughout the day. This may mean jumping on a small trampoline or joining a team sport.

Every child is different and will deal with stress differently. Work with your child to explore different methods of self-calming to find one that they prefer. By practicing ways to manage stress ahead of time, you can help nurture your children through stressful situations now, and teach them skills they can use in the future.

If you feel that your child is experiencing more stress than their peers, or if you feel that you need assistance teaching your child these skills, consider seeking help from a Mental Health Professional.

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