

Helping Your Stressed Child

BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.

WITH SPRING'S ARRIVAL schools regularly conduct their yearly academic assessments to measure students' achievements and progress. Given the stakes, children and teenagers can be at risk for significant stress. Small amounts of stress can be positive and beneficial. It can help prepare children to tackle what is stressing them. Too much stress, however, can be detrimental to your child's mental health.

What does stress look like in children and adolescents? Older children, or children with well developed verbal skills, may actually be able to explain that they're feeling overwhelmed and anxious. They may even be able to state the reasons why. Clues to other children's stress levels, however, can be found in their behavioral and emotional reactions. Stress may change a child or adolescent's typical behavior. Increased worries or irritability, clingy behavior or increased complaining about school are typical stress reactions. Older children or teenagers experiencing

stress often avoid parents, express hostility to family members or distance themselves from their usual peer group. Frequent feelings of illness, headaches and stomachaches may also indicate heightened stress – although a medical evaluation should first rule out physical illness.

Parents can take many steps to address their children's stress. First, listen to your child. Often children do not use the word "stressed" to describe their feelings, but use words such as "worried," "scared," "annoyed" or "angry." If they are able to talk about the situation, ask them to describe what occurred in the classroom, on the playground or in the neighborhood. Be sure to listen to them. If certain negative themes reoccur – such as bullying or difficulty with an academic subject – further action may be needed, such as a discussion with the bully's parent or a quick school conference. When parents' attempts to address the issues don't seem sufficient, however, professional assistance may be

needed to help the child learn better ways to handle stress.

It's important for children to learn that challenging and frustrating situations happen regularly. No one is immune from them and the stress they cause. Children, however, also benefit from learning how to think realistically about these situations and how to handle them. Children grow when they learn they can resolve or improve some difficult situations, perhaps by assertively dealing with peers or learning better time management skills. Also learning how to handle and manage the stress that is caused by situations they can't change, such as a family illness, is equally important for their optimal mental health.

Although no one ever wants more stress in life, if managed properly, your children's struggle with it can be an opportunity for personal growth – for them and your entire family.



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