



## **Stress in Children: Signs, Symptoms and Strategies to Cope**

Stress is a natural and adaptive response that the body experiences when faced with challenges or demands. It is the body's way of preparing to confront or avoid a perceived threat, often referred to as the "fight or flight" response. Stress can arise from various situations, both positive and negative, and can manifest in physical, emotional, and behavioral ways. Stress in children can be difficult to assess as it is subjective, and there are varying degrees of severity. "Stressors are understood as any demand that an individual judges to be overwhelming to their resources. Therefore stress is the individual's response to a wide variety of demands. Broadly, stress can be categorized as chronic or acute. Ongoing bullying, violence in neighborhoods, or family instability, for example, can cause chronic stress in children. In contrast, acute stress happens quickly and ends quickly, generally occurring in reaction to an unexpected event. For example, in children, an argument with a friend may trigger acute stress." (1) While the nature and severity of stressors varies given each individual child's circumstances, every child encounters some degree of stress throughout their childhood.

While the research regarding stress in children hasn't historically been abundant, much research regarding short and long-term stress in children has been generated following the COVID-19 Pandemic. "In the short term, stress can push a child to practice for her piano recital or inspire a teen to study when he'd rather be out with friends. But chronic stress—for example, from unrelenting pandemic-related pressures, social unrest, or violence—is different. Left unchecked, long-term stress can contribute to a long list of physical and mental health problems. Prolonged stress can cause high blood pressure, weaken the immune system, and contribute to diseases such as obesity and heart disease. It can also lead to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression—disorders that are becoming more common in youth." (1) Research from 2022 further showed mental illness to be "at an all-time high—especially among children. In fact, between 2016 and 2020, the number of children aged 3 to 17 diagnosed with anxiety grew by 29% and those with depression by 27%, according to a study published in 2022 in *JAMA Pediatrics*." (2) For this reason, it is essential that school personnel and parents/caregivers be aware of the initial signs of childhood stress and be armed with a few strategies to help children cope.

### **Signs and Symptoms:**

A child who is experiencing a high level of stress may exhibit various physical, emotional, and behavioral signs that indicate heightened stress levels. It's important to note that these manifestations can vary among individuals, and not all children will display the same symptoms. “Children, especially teenagers, aren't likely to ask their parents to help them manage their stress. Sometimes, they don't even recognize that they are feeling stressed out. As a caregiver, you might notice something is off before they do. Helping your children manage their stress can lead to more balanced and healthier lives.” (2)

- Physical symptoms of stress can often be the easiest to detect, but can be mistaken as a physical illness. A child who manifests stress physically might exhibit changes in sleep patterns, for instance, difficulty falling or staying asleep or engaging in excessive sleep. Digestive issues, like nausea or changes in appetite, as well as persistent headaches can also be signs that a child is experiencing a heightened level of stress
- Many children express stress emotionally by demonstrating heightened levels of worry or nervousness about typical activities that would normally cause them no second thought. Some children exhibit mood swings, irritability and a decreased tolerance for frustration. In more pronounced emotional manifestations of stress, a child may appear overly sad or withdrawn and they may show less interest in activities that they once enjoyed.
- Finally, childhood stress can manifest itself in behavioral symptoms such as changes in academic performance. For example, a child may struggle with school work in areas that they hadn't before or his/her grades may take a sharp decline. Stress in children can also cause behavioral outbursts, defiance, and/or an overall restlessness.

It's crucial for parents, teachers, and caregivers to be attentive to these signs and offer support to the child. Open communication, a nurturing environment and a few basic strategies can help to identify the sources of stress and implement strategies to manage and alleviate it. Below are some examples of strategies that can help a child to manage daily stress. However, if stress persists or symptoms intensify, seeking professional help from a pediatrician or mental health professional may be beneficial.

### **Strategies:**

- One simple strategy for combating childhood stress has to do with routines. Like many other aspects of healthy social/emotional functioning for children, establishing and adhering to a routine can help children manage stress in that they have a baseline environment that is predictable and secure. This gives them a sense of control over the things around them. Part of this routine should include an overall emphasis on maintaining a healthy lifestyle such as regular exercise (or play), proper nutrition, sleep and the less time spent on screens, social media, etc., the better.
- Another strategy for coping with stress is to develop time management skills. This is particularly important in relation to more short-term stressors such as balancing academic

deadlines in school with time consuming/demanding extracurricular commitments. Providing children with the skills to prioritize tasks, break assignments into smaller parts and manage their time according to importance, can make them less overwhelming. In addition, helping your child to set realistic and reasonable goals, and to celebrate small successes on the way to larger achievements, can help cast a positive light on otherwise stressful situations.

- Other factors that can help alleviate stress in children are utilization of relaxation techniques like deep breathing, mindfulness and visualization as well as fostering strong and positive social connections with peers. Children need to be with other children. They need to learn and grow academically and physically, but they also need to play. This outlet is important in reducing stress. Organized sports and extracurricular activities are a bonus and can add a great deal to each child's life, but it is important to have a balance so that children don't become overwhelmed by too many commitments.

Overall, stress in children can be complicated and nuanced for both the child and the parent or caregiver. "Experiences of early life stress in children may promote the development of short- and long-term behavioral and emotional problems that can increase risk of mental and physical health disorders into adulthood. In addition, patterns for coping with stress, whether beneficial or detrimental, are developed in childhood and may become lifelong. Given this and given that half of all mental health conditions in children begin before the age of 14 years, it is crucial to identify and address children's psychological needs and stress early in their lives." (1) In addition, it is important to remember that every child is unique, and it may take some time to discover the strategies that work best for each child. Some children are able to manage short-term, or acute, stress with some simple interventions while other children, especially those experiencing more long-term or chronic stress, may require more specific, clinical intervention. If signs and symptoms of stress persist and impact a child's ability to participate in typical life activities, seek support from the child's pediatrician, outside healthcare providers and school support staff, if appropriate. This can help to create a team of support for a child struggling with the effects of stress. While the topic is complex, stress management is a life skill. Every person experiences some level of stress on a daily basis. With proper identification of the root causes of the stress and implementation of strategies to combat it, most children can manage stress successfully and grow stronger as a result.

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## References

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