



## Stressed Beyond Belief

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When I think back to my childhood, it seems as if my life was so carefree back then compared to my life now. As adults, we often feel weighed down by stressful experiences and events. We can't help but think that kids have it easier, but you know what? We're wrong!

The reality is that the average child experiences stress on a regular basis. For children who have trouble making and keeping friends, school is especially difficult. Strong, reassuring friendships offer children a buffer against the typical stress and expectations in a child's day. Play, after all, is an extremely important way that a child releases energy and works through daily conflicts. Without supportive friendships, play during recess, exercise during P.E., social time during free play and on the school bus and extracurricular activities only adds stress and social pressure. For others, these activities offer wonderful opportunities to relieve stress.

Kids in Stepping Stones groups have their own ideas of "stress makers" which include:

- being overscheduled--not enough "chill" time
- having homework that is either too hard or too much
- feeling that parents' expectations are unrealistic
- feeling left out at school
- reacting to peer pressure or teasing

The first step in helping your child is determining that your child is, in fact, experiencing stress. Look for certain behavioral clues, and keep in mind your child's unique history and personality. It's more important to notice any **changes** in behavior than just the behavior itself. Ask yourself the following questions to help you figure out if your child is under stress:

- **How long have the symptoms lasted?** If you have a child who has never been a good sleeper, it is less likely that his sleep problems are caused by stress. On the other hand, if your child suddenly begins waking in the middle of the night, crying and complaining of nightmares, then it is important that you consider stress as a possible cause. If a symptom persists for a couple of days, it may not be caused by stress, but if it lasts for more than a few weeks, you need to pay attention to it.

- **How intense are the symptoms?** It's OK for your child to complain of a stomachache before school--as long as he attends school and comes home without further complaint. But if he says he can't get out of bed because of his stomach and begins missing school because of his complaints, then it is important to take him to the doctor. If your child complains of a stomachache before school and then as soon as he is allowed to stay home he appears healthy with no further complaints, this may be a sign of stress. You have relieved the stress by allowing him out of school. Find out what about school is stressing him.
- **Do other kids his age have the same symptoms?** It's OK if your two-year-old has trouble staying in his seat at a restaurant; it's not OK if your eight-year-old has trouble. It's OK if your three-year-old has trouble separating from you; it's not OK for your ten-year-old. Check with your doctor if you are unsure of what is developmentally appropriate for your child.
- **How many symptoms are there?** Many times, stress causes more than one symptom to appear. A child in Stepping Stones was complaining about fatigue and becoming irritable and withdrawing from activities which previously gave him pleasure. This combination of factors led his parents to the conclusion that he was under stress.

The following is a list of stress signals in children:

- physical symptoms such as uneven heartbeat, shallow breathing, teeth grinding or clenching, frequent urination, headaches, stomach problems, restlessness, skin blemishes or rashes, and poor appetite or other changes in eating habits
- fatigue, insomnia, or nightmares
- irritability or crying easily
- compulsive behaviors such as nail biting, hand washing or lip licking
- bragging, nervous laughter, or shyness
- poor concentration
- general anxiety

Teaching your child basic stress management techniques is the easiest way to help your child handle stress. The following are a few methods we have found useful for children of all ages. Some of these techniques require guidance from you, and not all of them may feel right for you or your child. Try those that feel comfortable for you:

- **Make sure your child is not overcommitted.** Children need time to relax and play at home. Prioritize your child's activities and drop ones that are not necessary.
- **Be proactive against stress.** Develop a plan to deal with your child's potentially stressful situations. Sit down together before a new activity that might be stressful and formulate and rehearse a plan.
- **Take baby steps.** Help your child break down what needs to be accomplished into small, manageable steps. This technique is especially helpful with homework, where each subject may need to be broken down into parts.

- **Set up special time each day with your child.** Spend 15 minutes a day just to talk, following your child's lead. If he doesn't feel like talking and would rather play cards, then do what he wants to do. He may talk with you when you least expect it!
- **Have a weekly family meeting.** Sunday evenings can be good family nights to share a meal without distraction and share positive feelings about each other. This is also a good time to problem solve family issues.
- **Make sure your child eats well and sleeps well.** Feed your child healthy, nutritious meals and snacks. Stress wipes out essential nutrients from our bodies. Give your child predictable bedtimes that allow them age-appropriate amounts of sleep.
- **Get physical!** Any organized or individual sport--running, walking, biking, karate--will help reduce body tension associated with stress. Stretch all the major muscle groups.
- **TV/Computer--Stress reliever or stress enhancer?** Make sure your child's television watching and computer game playing are stress relievers not stress enhancers. Just because your child **wants** these mediums to decompress from the world does not mean that your child **needs** these mediums. Many TV and computer programs are extremely violent and competitive. This can easily increase your child's stress rather than decrease it. Stay away from too much of either, particularly if they are violent in nature.
- **Manage your own stress well.** Cut back at work if you can to be more available to your children. Try to leave your stress at the office so you don't bring it into the house with you. Maybe stopping at the gym on the way home will work off some of that ugly stress.
- **Encourage your child to express anger with words not actions.** Unresolved anger can be a potent source of stress. It is not whether you get angry but how you get angry that is important. Your child needs to know that anger is OK, but he has to learn how to express it so that others can hear it. Practice with your child verbal ways of getting angry. "I get angry when you....""That makes me mad!"
- **Role play with your child before they enter stressful situations.** Practice with them ways to respond verbally.
- **Use stress reducing exercises.** Teach your child deep breathing or help your child to systematically tense and relax all major muscles (progressive relaxation). Or have your child close his eyes and imagine a pleasant trip or a favorite memory. This technique of visual imagery or "relaxing daydreaming" is a great way to reduce stress. Your child might enjoy a nightly massage to relax him and help him sleep. Or if he does not like massage, try a "back tickle", gently and lightly stroking your child's back.

I encourage you to adopt as many of the above exercises as you're comfortable with. With a little diligence and practice, your child will soon feel confident that he or she can more easily manage the stresses in his life. Remember to embrace everything your child does well. Praise direction, not perfection!