



# Helping Children Cope: Children and Stress

## Arlene M. Fulton, Ph.D.

Child Development Specialist

At one time or another, we have all wished "Oh, to be a child again" thinking that we would have no cares, no worries, nothing to be concerned about. The fact is that children today experience more stress and strain than we sometimes realize.

Not all stress is unhealthy. The struggle to learn to walk, to ride a bike or to learn to read are good examples of how stress can be perceived as a challenge. These challenges help children move toward a more mature form of behavior. Stress is an expected and normal part of human development.

Common stressful events for children can include: going to day-care, preschool or school for the first time; fights or arguments with friends and family members; difficulties with a teacher or caregiver; a move to a new home or town; parents' divorce or separation; death of a family member; or parent's loss of a job. Several authorities indicate that children are stressed any time they are:

- given too much responsibility or information
- expected to deal with too many changes
- overloaded emotionally.

Under such conditions, chronic stress can occur and, as with adults, can interfere with the child's health and quality of life.

### Just What Is Stress?

Stress is defined as a strain, an urgency or a pressure that can be felt by an adult or a child. It is often thought to be a tension that arises when a need is not met, when effort is frustrated or when needs, goals or expectations are not compatible. Generally we can identify three types of stress: ordinary stresses, developmental stresses and unique life stresses. Each type of stress can have impact upon a child's daily living patterns.

Ordinary stresses are those tensions that are a part of daily life. Having to wake in the morning, get



dressed and be ready for the school bus by 7:45 a.m. is an ordinary stress in the life of many children. Ordinary daily stresses can be dealt with in a variety of ways. Adults can help children to plan and time their activities, perhaps allowing extra time or waking a bit earlier to complete all tasks before 7:45 a.m.

The people within a child's environment can add to or diminish the stress children experience. For example, the school teacher can unknowingly place great stress on children with excessive homework assignments. After school activities may result with children not arriving home until 6 p.m. or after. By the time dinner is over, baths are taken and a few household chores completed, it may be bedtime. School work and family expectations may conflict. Parents and teachers can work together to lessen the stress children feel in not having all homework assignments completed. Rearranging time schedules, establishing study times or decreasing homework may be alternatives adults can consider.

Developmental stresses involve the stress of growing and changing. These stresses involve changing habits and one's view of oneself. Developmental stresses require that a child master a skill before moving on to another task. Learning to walk, talk and express ideas are developmental tasks of the preschool aged child. Learning to read, write and calculate are developmental tasks of the school age child.

The child who cannot, or does not, master developmental expectations will suffer greater stress than will the child who masters the tasks. Adults can help children cope with developmental stresses by observing difficulties they are having, guiding in a positive way and offering support as needed. Unique life stresses are those events that are unique to a particular child. Events that might include illness, separations, changes in family structure or family living patterns, may all be stressful. These events not only make demands on the child, but they also affect the behavior of other family members. Interaction patterns to which a child is accustomed may greatly change.

Adults can best help children cope with unique life stresses by talking with them openly about their feelings and plans. Helping children understand what led to the unique stress can result in children not feeling they were at fault or the reason for the changes that occurred.

### **Children's Response to Stress**

Stress responses are unique for each child. When adults observe the behavior of children closely, they quickly learn to recognize signs of stress. An adult can find out a great deal by listening carefully to a child's conversations. Watching and listening to a child at play is also revealing. Some signs of stress include a change in appetite, sleeplessness, vomiting, paleness, complaints of headaches, stomachaches or nausea. Also, watch for some of the following changes:

- Regressive behaviors like thumb-sucking, nail-biting, bed-wetting or nightmares.
- Loss of interest in activities the child normally enjoys.
- Loss of motivation, poor school performance, inability to concentrate or truancy.
- Irritability, uncharacteristic withdrawal or dependency, depression or apathy, or loss of friends.

- Increased hostility and aggression or increased fighting with other children.

The appearance of one of these behaviors, especially if it is short-lived, is probably no cause for great concern. However, do look for patterns of changes in a child's behavior. Be prepared to help children deal with stressful situations if the behavior: 1) continues over a period of time; 2) interferes with normal growth and development; and 3) marks the occurrence of other noticeable changes in behavior at about the same time.

### **SIGNS OF STRESS IN CHILDHOOD AN OVERVIEW**

#### **Infants and Toddlers**

- uncontrollable crying
- rocking back and forth
- excessive sleep
- head-banging
- startle easily

#### **Preschoolers**

- bed-wetting after being trained
- excessive thumb-sucking
- clinging to parents
- exaggerated fears
- uncontrollable crying
- temper tantrums

#### **School-age Children**

- frequent whining
- fearfulness
- nightmares
- bed-wetting
- refusing to eat
- overeating
- tics (nervous twitches)
- frequent daydreaming
- frequent illness

#### **Teenagers**

- aggression
- withdrawal and sadness
- insomnia
- excessive sleep
- destructive actions
- depression
- hypochondria
- uncontrollable emotions

## Helping Children Cope

For children, an important buffer against stress is a healthy parent-child relationship. Growing up in a caring family provides the child with the security, consistency, respect and honesty they need to become a confident and independent person. Some ways adults can show children that they care are as follows:

Build communication patterns with children. Talk with as well as listen to your children. Describe and explain. For example: "This is what you can expect." "This is what will happen." "This is what we will do." Just as important, listen to what your child has to say. Listen for the message in the words and watch for the feeling behind them.

Spend time alone with each child daily. Sometimes this "private time" together will cause children to ask questions. Sometimes just the presence of a parent reassures a child that a parent cares.

Touch your child physically and emotionally. A hug, a kiss, a smile can offer reassurance and relief.

Along with creating a caring relationship, parents can help children cope with stress in other ways:

- 1) Provide your child with a sense of security. Set guidelines for behavior, develop a comfortable daily schedule and help your child find socially acceptable ways of dealing with negative feelings.
- 2) Be realistic in terms of what you expect from your child. Are your expectations for behavior in line with your child's age and abilities? Expecting too much or too little can create a stressful situation.
- 3) Provide your child with opportunities to be successful. Success is important in building a positive self-concept and a feeling of self-worth. A child who feels good about himself/herself can more easily deal with stress.
- 4) Teach your child how to relax. Play is a wonderful way to deal with stress. Running, laughing, building or drawing are some of the ways children can relax. Children learn better, work better and are healthier when given time for play and self-expression.
- 5) Teach your child how to make decisions and solve problems. Parents can help the development of these skills by giving children choices along with opportunity and time to solve their problems.



Most of the time, a parent's efforts will be enough to help a child through a stressful event. However, if the situation also affects the parent, or if the parent is unable to cope with the child's reaction, seeking outside help is a good idea. Sometimes all the child needs is a friendly adult to talk things over with. At other times, the professional help of a counselor is needed.

Knowing your own limitations and using existing resources is a sign of strength and the most effective way of helping your child. Resources in your community might include a school counselor, youth minister, private professional counselor or the Child Guidance Center (call your County Health Department for the location of the center nearest you).

## References

- Elkind, D. (1982). *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Kersey, K. (1986). *Helping Your Child Handle Stress: The Parent's Guide to Recognizing and Solving Childhood Problems*. Washington D.C.: Acropolis Books Ltd.
- Lowenstein, J. (1993) *A is for Apple, P is for Pressure: Preschool Stress Management*. In *Annual Editions: Early Childhood Education*. Connecticut: Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.
- McCracken, J.B. (1986). *Reducing Stress In Young Children's Lives*. Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Sanders, A. and Remsburg, B. (1996). *The Stress-Prof Child*. New York: Signet.
- Segal, J. & Segal, Z. (1993). *Why Kids Are the Way They Are*. In *Annual Editions: Early Childhood Education*. Connecticut: Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.

(Portions of this publication have been adapted from "Children and Stress", EP 264, Lincoln University Cooperative Extension, Jefferson City, Missouri.)



Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Charles B. Browning, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$227.00 for 1,000 copies. #6307 0296 CK Reprint.