

About Childhood Stress:

In really small doses, stress can be healthy. Any time we are required to learn, grow, and change, humans feel stress.

Childhood is full of changing developmental needs, evolving understanding of the world around us, and a constantly fluctuating set of expectations from peers, parents, and caregivers. The feeling of stress helps us work extra hard at the change that needs to occur in order for us to flourish.

However, in large or consistent doses, stress can become toxic. When that happens, it is vital that trusted adults come alongside kids and help them learn how to become aware of the feelings associated with stressful situations and model using healthy strategies to manage the stress kids experience.

Because humans use behavior to communicate their needs, kids often show us how they are feeling through physical symptoms:

- **Changes in appetite**
- **Changes in toileting**
- **Vague physical complaints, like head/stomach aches**
- **Sleeping problems**

Emotionally, kids often give us clues to high levels of stress by showing high levels of worry or fearfulness. They might act moody, distant, or clingy and seem to struggle to control their emotions or respond to challenges in expected ways. Often, stressed or anxious kids may appear oppositional. Make sure to get curious about the why under any behavior you see. That doesn't mean asking kids why they are doing something, because much like adults, they rarely are consciously aware of the "why." When we suggest chasing the why under a behavior, watch and wonder about the *need* underneath the behavior. Sometimes we can ask questions like, "What do you need right now?" or "What were you hoping would happen when you did that?"



Parent/Caregiver Tips:

- Listen to your child's words and behavior. Don't downplay their feelings by minimizing their experience.
- Model healthy coping strategies through consistent self-care and involve the child in those activities.
- Roleplay how to handle stressful situations.
- Reduce/eliminate intake of news, scary movies, knowledge of adult issues, etc.
- Create and practice traditions and rituals during times of transition.
- Increase playfulness. Be intentional about playing with your child for at least 5 minutes per day.
- Encourage control by offering age-appropriate choices.



Next Steps:

If you start to notice that your child is consistently not finding joy in previously enjoyed activities, struggling at school with friends or teachers, struggling at home with family members, or is routinely having difficulty controlling their behavior, it may be helpful to contact your pediatrician, a local therapist, or the counselor at your child's school.

Additional Resources:

Toxic Stress: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

Identifying Signs of Stress in your Children and Teens: <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-children>