

Small Child, Big Stress?



Do you sometimes experience stress? So does your child. Stress may be a part of life for everyone, but prolonged stress can be harmful. You can help your child learn to recognize and cope with the feelings of frustration, sadness, worry, and anger that can lead to stress or be signs of stress.

Notice behavior that seems unusual for your child.

Three-year-old Micah usually chatters and laughs with his parents and friends, but his mom notices he's spending more time hugging and rocking his teddy bear. His classmate Maddie usually plays happily with her toys and books, but suddenly she is clinging to her teacher more often and is easily upset. Both may be showing signs of stress.

Help your children identify their feelings.

Tell children what you see and help them label their feelings. "Micah, your face looks sad." "Maddie, you look worried. Can I help?" Try reading books together about feelings. Ask your children's librarian for suggestions. Two to consider: *Glad Monster, Sad Monster* by Ed Emberley and *Feelings* by Aliki.

Teach ways to cope.

Model what to do with negative feelings. "I feel sad. Let's hug and then go for a walk." "I'm frustrated no one answers my call. Let's have lunch and I'll try later." "Would you like to pack a bag with a few favorite things to carry with us when we move?" Encourage your child to share her feelings by listening and not dismissing them.

Limit stress.

Try to anticipate events that might cause stress and prepare your child. Let her know Grandma is sick, so she will be in bed when you visit, or that she will have a new teacher at school. Reassure her that a change may feel strange at first, but that will pass. Keep daily routines as normal as possible during stressful times. If possible, avoid making additional stressful changes when your child is already adjusting to a current change.

Be there.

Make time to talk with your child every day. Spend time together even if he doesn't seem to feel like talking. Reassure him often he is loved and will be cared for. Just having fun together can strengthen your child's coping skills.

Talk to her child care or health care provider.

Share your concern if your child displays severe or prolonged signs of stress. A child who shows little interest in daily activities, doesn't sleep or eat normally, or continues to seem withdrawn or easily upset may need additional help.

For related Web resources, see "Small Child, Big Stress?" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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