

Stress Management for School-Age Children

What are common stressors for school-age children?

- School (classes and sports)
- Peer and sibling interactions
- Conflicts with parents
- Body image and changes
- Bad thoughts and feelings about themselves
- Being in too many activities
- Having expectations that are too high
- Family concerns: money, health, divorce, separation, moving

How do school-age children react to stress?

- Sleep problems
- Avoiding group activities
- Withdrawing from friends
- Stomachaches, headaches, and other body pains
- Changes in appetite
- More fear and worry
- Anger, low spirits
- Not behaving

What can parents do to help their child handle the stress?

- Encourage stress-reducing habits like healthy eating, regular sleep routines and exercise
- Encourage your child to take part in non-competitive social or recreational activities like clubs, scouts, etc.
- Listen to your child and try hard to understand their feelings:
 - Give them your full attention when you're listening, put down devices.
 - Instead of giving advice or asking questions, be understanding about your child's stressful experience
 - Pay attention to their feelings and give the feelings a name (worry, embarrassed, envious)
 - Children are getting more mature with their feelings
 - Understand that children's reasons for stress aren't always clear
 - Tell your child that all feelings are okay, it's what they do with them that counts!
- Pay special attention to negative (I'm stupid) or catastrophic thinking (My life is terrible) and support your child in finding different ways to manage stress
- Know your own responses to stress, use these as examples for how to help your child cope
- Show your child how to use **Assertive Communication** skills:
 - **Assertive Communication** is a way of saying how you feel and making requests that value your need and the other person's needs. It's an "I count, you count" way of communicating
 - Example: "I need some help cleaning up the family room"
 - In **Aggressive Communication** the speaker clearly states their feelings, opinions and needs without considering the feeling and needs of the other person. It's an "I count, your don't" way of communicating.
 - Example "You kids are so lazy, you never pick up your toys!"
 - In **Passive Communication**, the speaker's feelings, thought and needs aren't expressed, expressed subtly or partially expressed. It's a "You count, I don't" way of communicating.
 - Example: Don't say anything to the children about helping to pick up their toys and do it all yourself.
- Help your children name the difference between controllable and uncontrollable

- stressors and how each needs a different response.
- **Controllable stressors** are those that we know about and can plan for. Prepare for stressful situations with your children and give them the chance to learn ways to handle the stress before it occurs.
 - **Uncontrollable stressors** are those that we have no control over. Help support your child to understand their own stress response. Learning to accept that sometimes we cannot change uncontrollable stressors and know the ways for our body to cope will help! (relaxation, managing stressful thoughts)
 - For peer conflict, don't just solve the problem for your child, help your child find ways to problem-solve for themselves. For example, ask your child:
 - What happened?
 - How do you feel about what happened?
 - How do you think the other child feels?
 - Can you think of other ways to fix this problem?
 - What might happen if you try this plan?
 - What might get in your way of using this plan?
 - What else could you do?
 - Would you use the plan again?
 - What would you change or do differently?
 - For parent-child conflict, help your child understand your feelings about the problem and that some things are not able to be changed (non-negotiable).
 - For example, ask your child:
 - Why do you think I get angry when you don't call to let me know where you are?
 - What do you think would happen if you don't do your homework?
 - Ask yourself: Did I tell or ask them how they feel? Did I tell or ask them what to do next, and what might happen next if they do that?

What can school-age children do to handle stress?

- Children can learn to pay attention to their own and other people's feelings.
- Children can understand their own responses to stress. Stress is a normal body response that happens when we face challenges that seem too difficult for us to cope with. Our bodies have a normal way of reacting to stress called the "fight or flight" response which involves the following:
 - **Physical:** muscle tightness, fast heart rate; short and fast breathing, sweating, cold hands
 - **Mental:** limited attention and focus, being very aware of a certain thing
- Children can learn things to decrease stress and simple problem solving to deal with stress:
 - Deep breathing
 - Talk about their feelings
 - Muscle Relaxation
 - Brainstorm solutions
 - Imagery (picture yourself doing something you enjoy)
 - Change strategy based on results
 - Yoga
- Children should always feel that they can go to the adult in charge for support and guidance.

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