

Stress and the Developing Child

Contributed by Isaac Eliaz, M.D., M.S., L.AC.

More and more variables are coming into contact with our children and adversely affecting their healthy development. One of these critical issues facing many children and adolescents today is anxiety and stress. Most stress faced by children is natural and to be expected, refining and defining the growing youth and is a part of the learning process that will define the child. While children will naturally have some stressful events as a matter of course and are able to adapt to them with relative ease, other events may greatly threaten their sense of well-being, and can be of greater concern.

Pressures that face our children really originate from a number of areas. Just as stressful issues affect adults they also affect developing youths. The greater concern rests with the stressors that overwhelm the child and threaten the framework that is still developing. Society has transitioned to such a fast paced, disposable nature that developing children are often lost in the shuffle and left to fend for themselves when confronting such stressors.

Stress on a young child can manifest in many forms that may pose a challenge. It is to these stressors that a child must respond and adapt. Significant events, especially those that alter a child's immediate environment such as a divorce or death can have long lasting effects on a child's psychological health and well-being. If stress is too intense or long-lasting, it can sometimes result in negative effects hindering the child's development. An array of concurrent stressors can even result in physical illness. The healthy response is really the key to healthy development. The true task of formulating a healthy response is a tremendous task for a young child and often a daunting one as they move into adolescence. An unhealthy response of course will lead to a decline in the physiological development of that child.

The distinction on whether these are events of a lasting nature or simply a minor and temporary situation is irrelevant. What is significant is that these demands or stresses are a part of children's daily existence. The challenge we face as adults is to help the child encountering stress to face and process the stressor in a healthy and productive way. The stress then becomes a healthy defining experience rather than one that will negatively alter the growth of the developing child or teen. A child is in need of basic coping skills that as parents we can help to foster. A teen is most in need of support and affirmation so that they may develop into young adults who are fully prepared to address the continued stressors they will encounter in their life's work.

What Can Parents Do?

I would like to offer some basic ways that you can help your child who may be undergoing stressful events.

1. The first and most obvious is communication. Talk to your child; ask them about their day, what they are studying at school and about their friendships. You will be amazed at the amount that your child will actually reveal to an authority figure that they feel safe with. It may be slow going at first but perseverance is key. Stick with it and let them know that you are truly interested. The investment will not only help your child but also assists to set up patterns for your child so that one day they will be an attentive parent as well.

2. **Stress can often make one feel that a solution is unreachable. Help your child to see that nothing is insurmountable. This will pay dividends in their teen years when things may seem so overwhelming. When your child feels very full with their life, take a break together. Clear your minds and return to the issue when your child is fresh, and help them find proactive solutions to address the issue. If it's a concern that they must perform grouping front of others, you can set up a small preview audience to help them get over stage fright. If it's a book report, make a day of lunch and going to the library.**

3. **Plan exercise. Take your child on a walk, take ten minutes to perform yoga, or simply play ball with your child. Exercise is a tremendous outlet for stress and will help alleviate much of the anxiety your child is feeling.**

4. **Look at your child's diet. What are they eating? Are they eating for health or are they eating sugary snacks that will temporarily elevate their system only to send it crashing down later. Make nutritious snacks readily available and you will find over time that it will not only help your child's eating habits but assist their body to better deal with stress.**

5. **Help the child anticipate stressful events. Adults can prepare children by increasing their understanding of the upcoming event and reducing its stressful impact.**

6. **Help the child to learn a variety of coping strategies such as asking for help if someone is teasing you as well as speaking up by telling them you don't like it; and even quite simply walking away. Coping strategies help children feel more effective in stressful situations.**

7. **Help the child to recognize, name, accept, and express their feelings appropriately.**

8. **Teach children relaxation techniques. Consider suggesting to a child such things as take three deep breaths; count backwards; tense and release your muscles; imagine a favorite place to be and visit that place in your mind.**

9. **Practice positive self-talk skills with your child "I'll really try and I think I can do this" to help in dealing with stress..**

As parents and as a community it truly behooves us to identify with our children's experiences and work to assist them in developing tools from which they can adapt to their stressors in a positive and healthy manner. Through educating parents can understand what is confronting their children and know how best to support their children and ultimately how to make these experiences positive ones that manifest in a well-balanced and healthy child and/or teen. Next month I would like to further explore diet as a critical component of children's health.

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