

Helping Children Learn to Cope with Stress



Children thrive in stable and nurturing environments. They benefit from having routines and knowing what to expect during the day. They generally cope with changes in their daily lives that are short lived. Some change, such as the birth of a baby or a grandparent coming to live with the family, can be difficult at first. Once the family establishes new routines, a sense of belonging and security returns.

Sudden and dramatic changes can affect children's feeling of security and lead to stress. When adults are under stress, they may find caring for their children more difficult. Job and money problems, changes in living situations, violence, relationship concerns and illness can create toxic stress for families. Toxic stress can affect a child's physical health and ability to learn.

Families can buffer stress for young children by providing a sense of connection and helping them develop the emotional skills needed to cope with stress. The presence of a consistent,

caring adult in a child's life makes it easier to recover from difficult situations.

Parents can help children learn how to name feelings and suggest positive ways to feel better. "You look sad. What if we took a walk outside in the sunshine?" Being able to express feelings will help children cope with problems and regulate their emotions. It may not be possible to make the source of stress go away. By responding to children in a consistently calm and kind manner, it is possible to minimize the impact of stress.

Families and Early Educators Supporting Children with Stress

Open lines of communication between families and early educators can help them reduce the effects of stress on children and find ways to help the children feel safe.

Families can:

- share what is happening at home that is stressful, such as: a new baby, loss of a job, etc.
- provide strategies they use that seem to help their child cope
- bring in a favorite toy, book or other comfort item
- ask about the child's behavior during the day and what strategies the early educators use that have helped the child.

Simple Steps to Reduce the Impact of Stress



Create special time together.

Simple routines provide structure and help children predict what comes next. This sense of knowing the routine helps children feel secure. During stressful times it may not be possible to have a completely predictable schedule. Families can use every day activities to maintain the sense of

predictability. These times can be "short and sweet." Bath time, tooth brushing, story time or sharing a meal can become opportunities to interact positively.

Shield children from stress.

Limit children's exposure to scary and stressful media coverage. Try to have heated discussions and arguments where children cannot hear them. Respond to children's questions about stressful situations in language they can understand. Give children only the information they need.



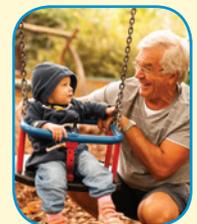
Maintain physical care.

Being well nourished with healthy foods and well rested makes it easier to cope with stress. Being physically active is a way to release pent up stress in a positive way. Being outdoors is calming for children.

Like children, adults cope with stress

better when they get exercise, spend time outdoors, and are well nourished and rested.

Seek support. Friends, family or community resources can provide support during stressful times. Friends or family may help care for the children, provide meals, and be an extra pair of hands or a listening ear when needed. Counseling could help a family through difficult times.



Reference:

Brooks R., Goldstein S. *Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope, and Optimism in Your Child*. McGraw-Hill: 2001.