

How do I know if my child is stressed?

Children and teenagers, like adults, experience stress. It can come from a variety of sources including changes in their bodies, changes in self-confidence, the death of a loved one, school, busy schedules, moving, relationship pressures, making and keeping friendships, or even coping with expectations they think their parents, teachers or coaches may have of them.

It can sometimes be difficult to know if your child is experiencing overwhelming feelings of stress and what to do to help. The following is a list of questions that may help identify if your child is experiencing stress. Keep in mind that everybody has a bad day. There are three important things to keep in mind when noticing a change in your child's behaviour: how long has it been going on, how often does it happen and how much is it interfering with daily life?

- Is your child having difficulty coping with typical everyday stresses?
- Is your child exhibiting increased frustration and anger over simple things?
- Does your child seem overly clingy or has s/he been having nightmares lately?
- Is your child suddenly impulsive and aggressive?
- Is your child acting more irritable and moody than usual?
- Is your child withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure?
- Is your child routinely expressing worries?
- Is your child complaining more than usual about school?
- Is your child crying more than usual?
- Is your child more jumpy or easily startled than usual?
- For younger children, is there bedwetting?
- Have you noticed changes in your child's sleeping patterns, such as sleeping more or less than usual?
- Have you noticed changes in your child's eating habits? Is your child eating more or less than usual?
- Is your child abandoning long-time friendships for a new set of friends?
- Is your child expressing excessive hostility towards family members?
- Is your child complaining of frequent stomachaches or headaches (when s/he has been given a clean bill of health by their doctor) or have these complaints increased in certain situations (e.g. after s/he gets off the phone with friends)?



How do I know if my child is stressed? (cont'd)

- Does your child seem to be more fixated on certain thoughts and unable to let things go? (e.g. "I just can't stop thinking about it!")
- Is your child more disorganized than usual?
- Does your child seem to be overwhelmed by normal everyday activities?
- Does your child often show a lack of interest in completing or increased difficulty in completing tasks, whether school work or otherwise?
- Has your child's school noticed changes in her/his behaviour?

What can I do to help?

- **Notice out loud.** Mention to your child that you notice something is up with them. For example, "I noticed that since you talked to your friend on the phone the other night, you seem a bit sad. Did you want to talk about that?" Make sure that this doesn't sound like an accusation, "Ok, what's wrong now?" or make your child feel like s/he is being put on the spot.
- **Actively listen.** Listen with interest, patience, openness, and caring. Try to avoid judging, blaming, lecturing or telling your child what s/he should have done instead. Ask questions and let your child take her/his time.
- **Validate the way your child is feeling.** By commenting on how your child must have felt, it shows you understand and that you care. For example, "That must have been very frustrating or upsetting." By expressing that you understand and empathize, your child will feel more supported.
- **Help your child name her/his feelings.** Sometimes children have difficulty expressing how they feel in words. Help your child put her/his feelings into words, whether it be anger, sadness, frustration, confusion, etc. This will help communication in the future.
- **Try to brainstorm with your child things that s/he can do to help reduce the stress.** This may include physical activity, drawing, writing, reading, watching TV, listening to music, hanging out with a friend, playing with pets, lazing around, etc.
- **Think forward.** Help your child become more future-oriented by making plans and goals s/he can focus on.
- **Make sure your child knows s/he is not alone.** Assure your child that we all go through stressful times. Remind your child that although it may not feel like it at the moment, this will pass.



How do I know if my child is stressed? (cont'd)

- **Just be there for your child.** Don't take it personally if your child does not want to talk to you about her/his problem. Being present and doing activities together can still help. Let your child know that you are there whenever s/he wants to talk. You may also want to help your child brainstorm about people s/he may feel more comfortable talking to (a safe adult or peer) about certain things.
- **Seek support.** If you are concerned that your child is experiencing significant symptoms of stress on a regular basis, it can sometimes be helpful to work with a licensed mental health professional. These individuals are trained to help people identify problems and develop effective strategies to resolve overwhelming feelings of stress. Seeking professional assistance may be exactly what is in the best interest of your family. It demonstrates your love and commitment to your family.

(Some of these tips are excerpted from the American Psychological Association and KidsHealth.org)

