

PARENT Talk



Stress and Your Child

Stress is a natural response to the pressure of life. Stress prepares the body to react to challenge.

Childhood is full of new experiences that can trigger stress. Even good experiences from birthday parties to vacation trips can be stressful. But too much stress can make children (and adults) cranky, unhappy and even ill.

Parents who know about stress and its effects in children can help recognize the causes of stress. Then, they can teach children to manage stress. These parents can understand their children by seeing the world from a child's point of view.

Communication is the key to understanding your child's stress and helping him or her to deal with stress effectively. See box above to determine if your child is showing signs of stress.

Common causes of stress

Many situations can cause stress in a child. Here are some common causes:

Situations at home

- Parent's separation or divorce
- A new sister, brother, stepparent
- Moving
- Death of a loved one or a pet
- A parent's stress

Other Sources

- School
- Competition
- A complex changing world
- "Growing pains"
- Hospitalization

To help your child manage stress ...

If your child shows signs of stress, use these methods to help him or her manage it. To relieve stress, children need to learn how to calm themselves, how to relax and how to release energy through exercise or imagination. These are skills they will take with them into adulthood.

Become calm

Relax shoulders and arms. Close eyes. Take a slow, deep breath. Exhale, repeat and concentrate on breathing. Have a quiet hour.

Relax

Tighten the right arm by making a fist. Hold the tension for a moment. Open the hand, and enjoy feeling the tension go away. Repeat, with the left arm. In the same way, tense and relax muscles in the legs, back, chest, shoulders, neck and face.

Let off steam

Games of jump rope and tag, bicycling, skating and rigorous play are ways to "let off steam." Check with your doctor before your child begins an exercise program.

Use imagination

Visit a park, forest, meadow or other quiet place. Observe the colors, sounds and scents. Later, close eyes breathe deeply and spend a soothing 10-minute break recalling those sights, sounds and scents.

While children shouldn't be sheltered from all stressful experiences, you can limit the number and intensity. Encourage your child to work out a plan to deal with causes of stress. Discuss ways the problem can be handled. Learning to cope with stressful experiences is essential to emotional growth. Let your child know you can offer suggestions and support.

If you need help ...

If you need more advice, call the Genesee Health System Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. ©