



Short Communication

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Stress in Children

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Stress

Stress can be defined as any type of change that can cause a physical, emotional or psychological burden. We all experience stress at some point in life, the only difference is its intensity and how people respond to stress.

In today's challenging world, children experience stress even at a young age. Stress in children of any age group is dependent on a lot of factors like home environment, divorced parents, relationship with siblings and/or peers, new home, school, studies, exams, career choices, physical health, financial situations etc.

How does one's body respond naturally to stress?

Stress triggers the flight-or-fight bodily response to a perceived threat or danger. Hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released that speed heart rate, slow digestion, blocks blood flow to certain muscle groups that make one feel numb and various other changes to the nervous system. Once the response has occurred and relaxation is sought, our systems return to normal. The major concern is that some people including children may not be able to find a solution and constant stressing leads to

the individual choosing temporary relief; mostly negative habits that later damage the whole system aggravating the existing issues.

What to look out for?

There can be short-term or long-term stress but the most dangerous is chronic stress which has a major negative impact. There is no age bar to when anyone can feel stressed. Children of young age also experience stress. Young children might not be able to express what they feel in words but this may be evident in their actions or behavior. Some children may become too sensitive all of a sudden, cry without reason, crave attention by either excessive snuggling, or even display violent or strange behavior. Most of the time, such behavior is easily termed as “He/she is not in the mood”. It may also be a simple request of just being with them or playing with them. This is when parents need to be extra cautious, look out for any other signs and rule out stress in their children.

A major barrier, also supported by APA’s research, for children who suffer from stress that may negatively impact one’s physical and /or mental health is the gap between parents and their children. With everyday challenges and other environmental factors, today’s nuclear families stand further divided where every member in the house is disconnected from each other. They hardly find time to speak, share or discuss their day. Most of the time parents are unaware of the fact that their children are stressed. While young children worry about home and school work mostly, a 2018 APA survey found that young people aged 15 to 21 years — Generation Z — experience stress around social issues reported in the news that includes violence, suicide, harassment, etc.

Other behaviors to look out for are when your child becomes irresponsible all of a sudden, makes lame excuses, procrastinates work more than usual, changes in eating and sleeping patterns and/or even falls sick regularly.

Are there different types?

If one experiences stress that motivates them to be better, work harder or perform well, then it is positive stress or eustress. Some examples are the first day at school, healthy race to finish point, meeting with a new teacher, etc. Such stress leads to healthy development. So, don’t worry!

Tolerable stress is something that activates the body to respond a bit more than a positive stress response. It is time-limited since it may be easily nullified with the change of situation, comforting words, or even a hug. Examples include a minor car accident, being admitted to the hospital for an injury. Can ask for help!

Chronic or toxic stress stems from traumatic experiences. It is prolonged, frequent and can result in negative impairment that may seep into adult years. Examples include physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, etc. Toxic stress can lead to one experiencing an anxiety disorder, impaired memory or even mood disorders. Toxic stress responses can also include changes in gene expression, i.e., genes in your DNA are turned on or off. Be cautious, must take help!

How to manage at home?

- It is always good to set up a routine when young. It helps children follow through and become responsible.
- Make ways to spend qualitative time with children as part of the daily routine. It could be a simple chat to talk about how the day was. Remember, no electronic devices need to interrupt this conversation.
- Once children grow older, the adults can make sure they are giving children space while being included.
- When children open up about their worries, adults must make sure to not dictate what to do, instead discuss possible means of solving, guiding and lessening the worries probably by speaking about their experiences thereby children relate to it.
- Stressful situations and bodily responses are always unpredictable. Adults must make sure they are calm before they speak or discuss with their children.
- Practice self-care to be role models. Most importantly as adults, make sure to have “ME time”. For example, if you mean to help the young ones, do what you enjoy best and be relaxed. This helps in being empathetic and not just sympathetic with children.
- Positive coping strategies include exercising, meditation, spending time with friends or loved ones, practicing positive self-talk, following a routine and preparing a checklist when necessary, maintaining a journal and being sure to reward oneself even if it's a small accomplishment.
- Make sure to get good enough sleep – one way is to limit screen time before bed.
- Take long walks, go for a picnic or cycle together– spend time with nature – it is a natural distress.

Seek further help

Believe everything can be managed and succeeded, always be willing to ask for help from a professional who can guide you better.

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