

# Helping Your Child Cope with Stress

## What is stress?

Stress is the body's natural response to situations within the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of situations. Did you know that stress can be good and bad? Good stress helps us to develop effective coping strategies to handle a challenging situation, as well as to establish resilience. Good stress helps children to stay motivated to do their best work; whereas bad stress has the potential to affect functioning and occurs when an individual's coping strategies are overcome by stress and do not work effectively.

## Causes of Stress

Events or situations at **home** (i.e. overscheduling, change in the family situation), at **school** (i.e. fear of failure), or within **peer relationships** (i.e. fitting in with a crowd) can cause stress. For children, stress can often build up and can lead to inappropriate behaviors, difficulty with academics, or health issues. It can be helpful to look back at events or situations to see what may be causing a change in behavior, particularly if stressful situations had been building and adding to each other for a while.

## Symptoms of Stress in Children (*"Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents", NASP, 2012.*)

- Irritability or unusual emotionality or volatility.
- Sleep difficulty or nightmares.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Drop in grades or other functioning.
- Toileting or eating concerns.
- Headaches or stomachaches.
- Unexplained fears or increased anxiety (that also can take the form of clinging).
- Regression to earlier developmental levels.
- Isolation from family activities or peer relationships.

## Factors That Help Prevent Stress (*"Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents", NASP, 2012.*)

- Positive problem-solving and coping skills.
- Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults.
- Clear expectations.
- Permission and ability to learn from mistakes.
- Developing competencies (academic, social, extracurricular, and life skills).

*Adapted from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) "Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents", 2012.*

- Consistent, positive discipline.
- Ability to express feelings appropriately.
- Feeling physically and emotionally safe.
- Good nutrition and exercise.
- Time to relax or do recreational activities.

How Parents Can Help (*“Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents”, NASP, 2012.*)

- Be aware of your child’s behaviors and emotions.
- Build trust with your child.
- Be available and open to talk with your child when they are ready.
- Encourage the expression of feelings.
- Teach and model good emotional responses.
- Encourage them to tell you if they feel overwhelmed.
- Encourage healthy and diverse friendships.
- Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.
- Teach your child to problem-solve.
- Remind your child of his or her ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends.
- Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes.
- Monitor television programs that could worry your child and pay attention to the use of computer games, movies, and the Internet.
- Use encouragement and natural consequences when poor decisions are made.
- Help your child select appropriate extracurricular activities and limit over-scheduling.
- Monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.
- Contact your child’s teacher with any concerns and make them part of the team available to assist your child.