



How Kids Handle Stress

What Is Stress?

Typically, both children and adults report that they are stressed when they feel pressured, sad, irritated, upset, unhappy, angry, confused, or insecure. Stress could be related to common or uncommon events. Stress also could result from extended exposure to events that people find rewarding (for example, exercise). Children and adolescents tend to worry or stress about school, friends, family, peers, acceptance, and appearance. Like adults, when children and adolescents experience stress, physical changes occur as a result. How well children and adolescents can deal with or cope with stress will in large part determine the psychological or physiological consequences of stress. Children and adolescents who experience stress and cannot effectively restore their body's balance (equilibrium) will tend to have worse mental or physical health outcomes. Children and adolescents with better coping skills will tend to have the ability to more readily bounce back from life's stressors. Although it is natural to feel worried and stressed, long periods of stress and poor coping skills could result in mental or physical disorders that could last into adulthood.

Coping with Stress

Children's and adolescents' coping skills and strategies vary (tantrums, yelling, crying, talking, withdrawing, problem-solving, etc). A few general styles that people use to cope with stress are:

- 1) Task-oriented coping - analyzing the situation and taking direct action to deal with it
- 2) Emotion-oriented coping - focusing on feelings and finding social supports
- 3) Distraction-oriented coping - using activities or work to take one's mind off the situation

Coping skills include the ability to perceive a situation accurately and, based on this accurate perception, to develop effective and helpful strategies to deal with stressors. Sometimes stressors (for example, death/illness, divorce, remarriage, moving, abuse, family or community violence, and natural disaster) are not directly under the control of children or adolescents, and as a result, it is important for children and adolescents to know where to go for accurate and trustworthy information related to coping with the stress (for example, family members, teachers, doctors/nurses, friends, or counselors).

Development of positive coping skills typically involves the following characteristics:

- A positive relationship with at least one adult and one peer
- Good social and problem-solving skills
- Appropriate levels of independence
- Boundaries and expectations consistent with an overall purpose
- A tested coping strategy
- A positive sense of self-worth
- Ability to focus on the problem and solutions
- Positive distractions (like hobbies)
- Feelings of contribution

Children and adolescents need to develop coping skills for times when stressors are present as well as times when stressors **could be** present. Sometimes, coping will involve dealing with a problem; other times it will involve focusing on avoiding a problem.

The Problem of Ineffective Coping

Ineffective coping leads to exhaustion and the depletion of the body's energy. This takes away energy necessary for the body to perform normal tasks and could result in health problems such as depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, changes in behavior, and a lowered immune system.

When Should a Child or an Adolescent Seek Help to Cope with Stress?

Children and adolescents should receive help to cope when stress is negatively influencing their psychological or physical health. More specifically, if children and adolescents cannot carry out typical functions (such as going to school, eating, or making friends) as a result of stress, help should be sought. Other signs of poor coping skills include extreme or long-lasting periods of sadness, hopelessness, or worthlessness. In addition, long or extreme periods of appearing socially withdrawn or erratic behavior may be indications of a lack of appropriate coping skills.

What Can Teachers and School Administrators Do?

Teachers and administrators could attempt to create a healthy environment similar to the one described for parents (see below). Schoolteachers and administrators have a unique challenge, however, because they need to monitor or assist dozens or hundreds of children or adolescents. Since many stressors are related to school (grades, tests, homework, relationships, peers, or appearances), it is important that children and adolescents be monitored for signs of stress (acting out, becoming overly introverted, extreme changes in behavior, etc.) in the school environment.

What Can Parents Do?

Parental consistency, praise for pro-social behavior, calmness, clarity, realism, and involvement assist in creating a healthy environment for teaching coping skills to children and adolescents. Parents can model appropriate and effective coping for and with their children and adolescents.

What Can Children and Adolescents Do?

Children and adolescents can and should learn and practice healthy coping skills. Like any skill, practice is needed, but the skills of healthy coping can have a lifetime of benefits.

Resources

- Tailors health information to parents, teens, and children: www.KidsHealth.org
- Fact sheets for parent and teachers: <http://www.repsych.ac.uk/info/young.htm>
- A brief guide on how to help children cope with stress: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/copestress.html>
- A resource for information on mental health and coping: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/index.cfm>
- An overview of stress and coping: http://www.cmha.ca/english/coping_with_stress/
- A brochure for parents to help teens deal with stress: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/66.htm>