Help Your Child Handle Stress

We all have to learn to cope with stress. Your child needs your help to learn how to do it.

Part of your job is to control, as much as possible, the stressors in your child’s life. Over time, you can teach him how to manage everyday stress and calm down quickly once it has passed.

Possible causes of stress

> Changes in your child’s life (a new baby, moving to a new house, learning to use the potty)
> Violence or physical or verbal abuse
> Fears like being afraid of the dark, strangers, or monsters
> Too much noise or activity in his environment
> Feeling unloved

Signs of stress

If your young baby seems stressed, it is important, first, to check for any physical problems. If there are none, he may need to have more cuddle and quiet time with you. This will help build secure attachment.

Many of these behaviors are normal unless they happen a lot or last a long time.

> Headaches or stomachaches
> Anger and aggression (in your toddler)
> Sleep problems
> Eating too much or too little
> Being easily upset
> Loud, frequent crying
> Behaviors like pulling his own hair, tugging on his ears, rocking, or fidgeting

Helping your child handle stress

Prevention of stress is ideal. But there are times when the best you can do is keep it at a minimum. These are some ways to help your child cope:

> Hug, cuddle, or massage your child
> Play or sing soft music
> Read or tell a calm story
> Give a warm bath (with adult supervision)
> Rock or sway rhythmically
> Let him use a pacifier or suck his thumb

Specific causes of stress and ways to help

> Separation: Prepare your child gradually for times you will be apart. Tell him you will be back. Cuddle him when you return.
> Changes in the daily routine (starting child care, moving to a big bed, beginning toilet learning): Prepare ahead of time. Try to make the new routine pleasant and easygoing. Keep as much of the old routine as possible.
> Fears (of darkness, abandonment, strangers, monsters, and so on): Be understanding. Give him enough time and support to deal with them. For example, let him keep his door open or a nightlight on.
> Family changes (a new baby, moving, divorce or remarriage, death in the family, or a parent’s new job): Use simple words to tell your child about the changes. Look in the library or bookstore for children’s books about the specific change.
> **Conflict or tension in the home:** Schedule times for the family to talk, relax, and play together, without TV or other distractions.

> **Violence or physical or verbal abuse:** Make sure it doesn’t happen to, or around, your child. If it does, secure attachment with a loving caregiver can ease the effects.

> **Feelings of being unloved:** Give your child your loving and undivided attention. Put down the cell phone and other distractions. Don’t shame your child or make a “big deal” out of mistakes. Recognize your child’s own personal style and temperament and adjust your expectations to match.

> **Need for more independence and activity:** Offer your child security while you encourage him to be curious and independent. Schedule extra time for him to try to do some things all by himself, such as putting on his own shoes.

> **Overstimulation:** Avoid frightening, violent, or intense TV programs or movies. Watch out for other sensory experiences that may overload your child.

Seek help from professionals for ongoing stress that may be too much for your child.

Your child’s lifelong reaction to stress is built into his brain during his early years. By showing lots of love and helping him recover from stress quickly, you can help him become a resilient adult.

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**Reflection**

Take time to watch your child.

These things stress my child out:

What I do to help my child handle that stress:

Other relaxation techniques we could try: