

[Part 2]
Children and Stress

Welcome back to the podcast on stress. In this segment we're going to be talking again with Nancy Ignatin, who will help us learn more about how stress affects children and what parents can do to help kids learn how to manage stress.

Nancy, can you talk a little bit about *why* children feel so stressed?

Well, we all know already that, these days, we live in a very stressful, fast-moving world. And even the most calm, stable child can be stressed due to so many pressures from all directions. Many kids have extra-curricular activities scheduled nearly every day, without much down time where they can catch up to themselves. And many kids face intense academic and social pressures but they don't yet have the skills for coping with all of this so they end up stressed out.

Can parents pass their own stress on to their kids?

Oh sure. It's very common for kids to pick up on their parents' stress. This can happen even if parents think they aren't acting stressed. Kids are really sensitive to stress and can feel worried or uneasy when their parents are under stress and especially if the parents don't say they're under stress. Children are much more likely to be affected by parental stress if their parents aren't managing their stress, so if you have kids, here's another good reason to really work on dealing with stress.

And how do kids usually show their stress?

Children can show their stress in many of the same ways that adults do, like irritability, trouble sleeping, or aggression. But it can be hard to recognize and pinpoint the signs of stress in kids because they are easily confused with normal developmental stages. Just to give an example, an irritable teenager may just be an irritable teenager, not necessarily a kid who's under stress. So to make things even more complicated, each individual stage that kids go through may have completely different symptoms. A stressed child at, say, age 8, is not likely to manifest the same symptoms when he's a teenager.

[Infants and Toddlers]

Maybe you could take us through the different developmental stages and help us understand how stress affects children of all ages. Let's start with babies. Nancy, can very young children really get stressed out?

I would say that in most cases, the stress that babies and toddlers feel is a natural part of their developmental process. They are learning and practicing new skills like talking and walking, and, especially in the case of toddlers, becoming independent. This learning process can cause frustration for both parent and child.

But there are times when babies and toddlers can feel real stress. This is usually the result of something that's going on with the parents -- something significant, I would say --

such as a divorce or a move, or some other transition or it even can be the result of some trauma, too.

Some infants or toddlers who are under stress may miss important developmental milestones, like walking or talking. They may avoid eye contact or they may be really clingy. Stressed out babies or toddlers often cry a lot or have frequent temper tantrums. But sometimes they show the opposite behavior and withdraw into themselves or seem disinterested in what's going on around them. And this is a red flag for parents of such young children.

So what should a parent do if they are worried their baby or toddler is under too much stress?

Well, I think all babies and toddlers need predictable, calm environments but this is especially important for stressed out babies and toddlers. They also need a lot of calm, loving interaction with trusted adults, and it's important to spend a lot of quiet time with your baby or toddler just enjoying each other's company. I would also urge parents who are concerned about young kids to talk with their pediatrician as soon as possible so that you can rule out any medical conditions.

What about preschoolers? How do they exhibit stress?

It's interesting. Preschoolers are beginning to struggle for independence and self-control, which can be stressful for them and for their parents! But again, this is normal child development.

Young kids, though, who are under stress may be reacting to the parents' stress once again. You know, if there's a new sibling on the horizon, or a divorce, or a move. Those things are very stressful for everyone.

Some signs that a preschooler is feeling stress may include regressive behavior, or doing things that they've already given up like sucking their thumbs or wetting their bed or having other toilet accidents. Stressed out toddlers may also have a strong sense of separation anxiety when their parents leave, or whine or cry excessively, or appear to be angry or aggressive.

Again, I urge parents of toddlers to see their pediatrician.

[School age]

What about the next stage, school-age kids?

Well, we all know that as a child grows and develops, her stress is more likely to come from more outside sources. By the time kids reach elementary school, more and more is being asked and expected of them academically and socially and of course they're more aware of this now. So they're taking standardized tests at school and they're trying to navigate an increasingly complicated social world.

At the extreme, school-age kids can exhibit stress by showing anger or signs of depression. That's not uncommon with a stressed child. They can be anxious, or have trouble settling down. And school kids who are stressed about academics may be overly concerned about their grades and fearful that they might fail. They may have nightmares or have trouble falling asleep. Some kids can even wet their beds, or become overly dependent on their parents. Kids at this age may also show some physical signs, such as stomachaches, headaches, or just vague mild aches and body pains.

So it sounds like stress can really start to show up around the time kids start school. What about the next stage, preteens? What kinds of stress signs can they show?

Preteens, as you know, can be a very complicated stage. They also have academic and social pressures, but they're intensified when kids get to middle school.

When they are under stress, preteens may ask to stay home from school or skip it altogether. And they tend to deal with their stress in negative or harmful ways because they're not really skillful at decision-making yet so they might become overly aggressive to themselves or others, show irritability, lie, steal, that kind of thing. And sometimes very serious problems can result like eating disorders or serious depression or anxiety.

Now we get to teenagers. Do they tend to have many of the same stress signs that adults do?

There is so much going on in a teenager's life that is stressful. High school can be extremely competitive, with sports and getting into college and extracurricular activities. And their social world is more important than ever. Teenagers are fully engaged in becoming independent people, which often means rejecting their parents' ideas and suggestions or even rebelling against outside authority.

Teens often do have some of the same stress signs and symptoms that we experience, like irritability, trouble sleeping or eating. But teenagers don't have many of the coping skills that adults have developed, so they tend to show stress sometimes in dangerous or self-destructive ways, like acting out at home or in school, withdrawing from friends or family. Their grades may drop, they may be depressed or anxious, or they may engage in other risky behaviors like drinking or doing drugs.

So we've talked about what stresses kids out and how they might react to stress. But how do you know if your child is just going through a tough time or if they really need help?

Parents might try to differentiate between a phase and something that needs more attention. It may be helpful to consider the *frequency, intensity, and quantity* of the symptoms. Take the example I used of a grouchy teenager. Irritability is typical of a teenager as we all know and it doesn't necessarily mean that a teen is under stress. But if your teenager is highly irritable day in and day out and it doesn't let up after a month or two, this could be a sign of something more serious. Parents should also trust their instincts. You know your child better than anyone. If your "gut" tells you to be concerned, you should be concerned.

What are some ways that parents can help a stressed out child?

Well, I think kids of all ages need time to relax, and just “hang out.” It’s amazing how little down time kids get, even older kids. Between sports, homework, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, many kids have very little unscheduled time in their days. It’s hard to believe, but there are even overscheduled toddlers! No matter how old your child is, make sure he has downtime every day, even if this means cutting back on commitments.

Of course, all kids need to get enough rest, exercise, and eat a balanced diet just as adults do. These basics can go a long way toward fighting anyone’s stress.

I also think it’s important for parents who are worried about their kids to consider their own stress level and what’s going on in their lives. Is it possible that your stress is affecting your kids, like a divorce or a move? Kids can pick up on this pretty quickly.

Concerned parents should also talk with their child’s health care provider to rule out any medical issues.

But the most important thing parents can do is to help their kids learn how to manage stress on their own. Stress management is a life skill that is just as important as learning to read or riding a bike. If your child learns how to manage stress now, just imagine how much better off he’ll be as an adult.

But what if you have a toddler or young child? They can’t really manage stress, can they? Actually, even toddlers can begin to learn how to deal with stress. When you tell an upset child to “take a deep breath” or stop what you are doing to sit down to calm your child, you are actually teaching good stress relief techniques.

You can also teach children of all ages how to do deep breathing or even some simple relaxation techniques, such as imagining a favorite place like the beach or the mountains when they start to feel stress. Kids are amazingly suggestive, and if this is practiced regularly, over time, this image can be conjured at a moment’s notice and is a wonderful way to reduce or prevent stress.

I also tell parents to think about managing stress as a family. Learn to recognize when family members are overloaded and take steps to decrease the pressure. Schedule downtime. Turn off the TV. Rent a favorite movie and be sure you allow enough time to laugh.

Well thank you Nancy. We’ve certainly covered a lot of ground here.

Listeners, I hope you’ve learned some useful tips and techniques for helping your children cope with stress. Next time we’re going to talk again with Nancy about how stress affects couple relationships.

Thanks for listening!

