

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



A Stress Check-Up for Kids

Kids respond differently to stress depending on their age, individual personalities and coping skills. Is your child stressed? The key is to identify your child’s physical, behavioural or emotional signs.

Children and stress? What do kids have to be stressed about? The answer to that is simple: the same things adults get stressed about – relationships, bullies, doing well at work/ school, meeting the expectations of others, lack of relaxation time, violence, money – the list goes on. In addition, today’s kids are exposed to images, events and threats that those of us who grew up in earlier times never imagined.

However, not all stress is negative. Stress can spur kids to play harder to win the championship game or study longer to pass an important test. Problems arise when stress overwhelms them. Are your kids struggling with too much stress? Each child responds differently, but the key is to identify your child’s physical, behavioural or emotional signs. Look for behaviours that are not typical for your child. Common symptoms include physical aches and pains, trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, or social withdrawal.

Is your child stressed? Ask these questions. Six or more means your child’s stress level is high. Two to five means stress levels are average.

A STRESS TEST FOR KIDS

1. I often feel tense, anxious and upset
2. I get stomach aches a lot
3. I get headaches a lot
4. People in my family often make me feel upset
5. People at school often make me feel upset
6. I have trouble sleeping
7. I worry about school, even at night and on weekends
8. I find myself eating a lot or not being able to eat when I get nervous
9. I have trouble concentrating on things because I’m worrying about something else
10. I have a lot of things that have to be done by certain times at school or at home

HOW TO HELP KIDS COPE WITH STRESS

- ✔ **Make sure your children are eating a healthy diet and getting enough rest.** Good nutrition and proper rest can boost resilience to stress.
- ✔ **Exercise is a great stress reliever for kids and adults alike.** Something as easy as shooting hoops in the driveway or a 15-minute walk are great mood-lifters.
- ✔ **Realize that some things may not be an issue for adults but can cause significant stress for kids.** Let them know that you understand they're stressed and don't dismiss their feelings.
- ✔ **Make time for your kids each day.** Play a board game, read a book together or watch a favourite funny movie as a family. Don't try to make them talk, even if you know what they're worried about. Sometimes kids just feel better when you spend time with them.
- ✔ **World news can cause stress.** Kids who see disturbing images on TV or online may worry about their own safety and that of the people they love. Talk with children about what they see and hear so that you can help them understand what's going on.
- ✔ **Are your kids too busy?** Like adults, children need time to relax. Kids who complain about all their activities or who refuse to go to them might be overscheduled. Talk with your kids about how they feel about extracurricular activities. If they complain, discuss the pros and cons of stopping one activity. If stopping isn't an option, explore ways to help manage your child's time and responsibilities to lessen their anxiety.
- ✔ **Do your children hear you and your partner talking about troubles at work, worrying about a relative's illness, or arguing about financial matters?** Try not to discuss such issues if children are within earshot as they may pick up on adult anxieties and start to worry themselves.
- ✔ **Encourage your older children to keep a journal.** Writing down thoughts and feelings can help get frustrations off his/her mind and into some perspective.
- ✔ **Tension is contagious.** Set a good example when it comes to managing your own stress. Your kids are watching you.

Some kinds of stress – moving to a new grade or new school, squabbles with friends, or feeling anxious about a school project – are inevitable in every child's life. Teaching healthy coping skills today will help kids weather life's ups and downs as they get older.

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