



Young Children Can Feel Stress Too

Children have different reactions to stress. Some act as if nothing happened. Some withdraw. Some act out. Some have physical symptoms.

A Child’s Reactions to Stress May Not Be What You Expect

Children can experience stress from one single event, several events over a period of time, or from difficult circumstances that exist in the environment around them. Examples include family disruptions like moves or deployment; loss of job; difficult schedule; homelessness; incarceration; divorce or loss of a loved one; hospitalization or medical procedures; abuse or neglect; poor quality child care settings; ongoing domestic violence; or natural disasters like hurricanes.

All parents want to do a good job raising their children. But stressful events or environments can have an effect on the entire family even if the situation has improved or the stressor has been removed. This is especially true for babies and young children. Understanding how the body responds to stress, being aware of how a child might react, and knowing where to get the right support can help make sure that the child heals as quickly as possible and returns to normal behavior.

Effects on the Body, Learning, Behavior, and Development

When a person experiences something stressful, the body reacts—your stomach tightens; your heart beats faster; you may get a headache or feel a rush of adrenaline. When those stressful events are intense or last a long time, the stomachache may turn into an ulcer. Often, children don’t have the words to explain how stress is making them feel, so it is up to adults to look for signs. What kinds of things might you see if your child has witnessed or experienced something stressful or traumatic? See the chart on page 2 for examples of what your child might be doing and suggestions of what to do.

Where to Go for Support

If your child is showing signs of being affected by a stressful event or environment, there are things you can do. One of the first things you might do is talk to your child’s pediatrician. Together, you can work to find the right support and services for your child and family.

Pediatricians understand that a child’s health can be affected by more than just infection or sickness. Children’s health is impacted by the world they live in as well. Because of this, pediatricians are starting to ask more questions so they can support families better.

Whether your child has had difficulty sleeping or eating, or has shown negative behavior with other children, your child’s pediatrician can give you strategies to help make things better. This could include referrals to services in your community if that is something you decide your child needs.

Some questions you might hear from your child’s pediatrician:

“Has your home life changed in any significant way (moving, new people in the home, people leaving the home)?”

“Since the last time I saw you (your child), has anything really scary or upsetting happened to you (your child) or anyone in your family?”

“Are there any behavior problems with your child at home, at child care or preschool, or in your neighborhood?”

“How do you feel about your child’s current behavior?”

“How do you, as a parent, deal with stress?”



Signs of stress or trauma and what you can do.

What you might see in your child's behavior	What you can do about it
Sleep difficulty (fear of falling asleep or staying asleep; nightmares)	Make sure there is a consistent and soothing bedtime routine (bath, reading books, dim light, cuddling/snuggling). Respond immediately to soothe your child after a nightmare.
Changes in how they eat (loss of appetite, refusal to eat, hoarding/hiding food)	Make sure there is a calm and consistent meal time where the child is able to sit. Offer the child choices in foods. Be comfortable with messiness during this time!
Changes in toileting (constipation, stool holding, bed-wetting, "accidents")	Reduce stress around toileting, using books, games, or activities that are only for those times. Older children should toilet regularly. Ensure that the child has food that supports healthy digestion (breast milk for infants; fruits, vegetables, and enriched grains for toddlers and older children).
Skill regression (reappearance of behaviors common at an earlier age, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, clinging to parents, fear of strangers, or baby talking).	Reassure your child that you are nearby and he is safe. Stay close by. Announce when you leave and when you'll be back. If he seems clingy, hold him for a little while longer. Encourage comfort items. Make sure there is a lot of "Time In"... sitting on your lap, spending time together, delighting in your child. Encourage art and pretend play as outlets for expressing fears and emotions.
Biting, kicking, tantrums, aggression.	Provide safe and loving limits. Help give young children the words they lack to describe their emotions. "I see you are angry. What should we do next?" Redirect to a quiet spot where they can calm down and organize their feelings. Read books like <i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i> that show children how to handle emotions.
Flat affect; no joy.	Look for unmet emotional needs. Offer a hug and a sense of safety. Be physically and emotionally available (not on your cell phone). Children learn by imitating adults. Even babies can mirror the depression of their parent. Talk to your doctor about ways to support your own emotional health.
Learning problems such as difficulty concentrating, frustration, difficulty with changing activities.	Reduce distractions. Model how to calm down when frustrated.

Families should know that many children have something happen that is really scary for them at least one time in their life. But with the right support from parents and other adults who love them, those children usually do very well and after a short time can get back to feeling the way they did before.

Taking Care of Yourself

Caring for a child who has been affected by a very stressful or scary event can be extremely challenging. It can cause even the best parent to feel tired, frustrated, or angry. If you experienced stressful events in your own childhood, what your child is going through may remind you of what you experienced.

Tell your child's pediatrician if you are feeling overwhelmed or would like additional support. He can suggest new strategies and resources in the community. Remember to use your own support systems, too. Spending time with friends and family, using the support of your community groups, and getting enough exercise and sleep can make a big difference.

