

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Is Stress Affecting Your Child's Health?

from the American Counseling Association

We like to imagine that the lives of our children are relatively stress free. Oh sure, things like that upcoming math test or who to take to the prom may cause them stress, but it's not the same kind of stress we face at work or over financial issues... or is it?

Actually, stress affects each of us, regardless of age. Stress is a combination of two things. The first is the "stressor," the situation that triggers the physical and emotional reactions we feel. For adults it can be anything from serious financial issues to something as temporary as this morning's traffic jam.

The second part of stress is our "stress response," our natural reaction to a stressor. Stress causes our bodies to release chemicals that increase our breathing, heart rate, alertness and muscle response. It's all a natural reaction that we inherited from our ancient ancestors. Back then, their survival meant reacting quickly to the threats they met.

That natural response happens to everyone, whether we're a 40-year old man facing a possible job loss, or a 10-year old boy facing that school bully coming toward him on the playground.

When the source of stress is a temporary situation, it usually isn't a big deal in terms of our overall health and well-being. But when someone faces stressful situations repeatedly, the result can be that the person feels constantly nervous or exhausted, and it can result in very real physical and emotional ailments.

How can you recognize if your child is facing high levels of stress? Often the warning signs will include changes in both behavior and physical well-being.

You may see stress-related behavioral changes such as anger or impatience over relatively minor things. Your child may seem constantly anxious, unable to relax and perhaps sleeping poorly or excessively. You might notice changes in eating behavior through either a loss of appetite or suddenly overeating. Frequent headaches or physical pain can also be stress-related.

Excessive stress is not a problem to be ignored. Try talking to your child in a non-judgmental way about what may be bothering him or her. Be kind but persistent if there is a reluctance to share information. Seeking help from an experienced professional is often needed to help the child. Your school counselor or a professional counselor specializing in children can often help address the underlying issues causing the stress.

*"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association.
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www.counseling.org.*

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