

Kids Have Stress Too! Ideas, Tips and Strategies for Parents of Preschoolers

Kids Have Stress Too! This is a program designed to help parents, caregivers and educators become more aware of children's stress, and to help children cope with and develop effective ways of dealing with stress. Here are some examples of activities and strategies that you can use to help children manage day-to-day struggles and stress, and ease the transition from home to school.

What is stress?

Stress is a normal, everyday occurrence. It's our body's response to feeling afraid, overworked, overstimulated, threatened or excited. We tend to think of stress as a bad thing, but a certain amount of it actually helps us feel alert, energized and excited. Stress can also lead to health problems, behaviour problems, hinders the child's ability to learn and get along with others.

Even very young children experience stress, and it is important for adults to recognize and help preschoolers deal with it. High levels of unrelieved stress can lead to behaviour problems and can interfere with a child's ability to function normally. When we help children deal with stress, they begin to build coping skills they will need throughout life.

Everyday stress:

Children can experience stress at home, in child care settings, or even in play with others. In the course of an average day, preschool children experience stress when they have to wait, when they want something they cannot have, or when they lose or break one of their toys.

Other common sources of preschool stress include:

- Early or rushed mornings, being hurried
- Exposure to new situations
- Too many expectations or demands
- Separation from parents
- Fights or disagreements with siblings
- Transitioning from one activity to another
- New beginnings such as starting kindergarten or child care
- Frequent change of caregivers.

These experiences can be stressful, but they are also normal, preschool versions of the sorts of stressors children will face as adults. Learning how to deal with them, with our help, is the first step in developing coping skills.

Helping children with "normal" stress:

Although we can begin to teach and model healthy coping strategies with preschoolers, the fact is, they cannot cope with stress on their own very well. Parents have the ability to help their children deal with day-to-day stress using simple tools every day that will help children feel connected to parents and other caregivers and providing a stable and happy home environment,

Connection: When preschoolers have secure relationships with their parents, they know that someone will be there to help them deal with their problems. Strong relationships also help children to trust and listen to the adults who are supporting them.

Home environment: Preschoolers can handle stress better when they have a healthy, balanced lifestyle with good food, lots of time for physical activity, play and relaxation, and daily routines that make their world feel predictable and safe.

What are the signs that a preschooler may be overstressed?

When children feel stressed, it usually comes out in their behaviour.

For example, in toddlers and preschoolers, a tantrum is one common kind of stress response, often due to a combination of stressors, such as being tired, hungry or bored

Other possible signs of too much stress include:

- Recurring headaches, tummy aches or neck pain
- Increased irritability, sadness, panic, anger, anxiety
- Intensification of nervous habits like nail biting, hair twisting, thumb sucking
- A pattern of overreacting to minor problems, e.g., yelling, crying, shutting down
- Trouble eating, relaxing or sleeping
- Unusual sleep patterns or nightmares
- Increased dependency or clinginess
- Unusually low energy, or the opposite, very high levels of energy or restlessness
- Increased behaviour problems, such as biting, kicking, poor listening,
- Increased whining, crying, fighting