

Health Tips for Parents

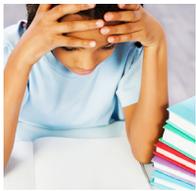
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How can I help my child handle stress?

Stress is the way our bodies and minds react to a particular challenge or situation. By recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress, you can help your child learn to manage his or her responses in a healthier way.



Plenty of scenarios can cause stress – good or bad – in a child’s life. A student may feel anxious about giving a class presentation, but that “good” stress can be used to inspire him or her to focus and prepare for the challenge.



An example of “bad” stress is when a child feels so overwhelmed with a problem at home or at school that it interferes with his or her ability to function normally. In these situations, the body activates a “fight-or-flight” response, resulting in heightened focus, strength and alertness. Once the child learns how to recognize a stressful situation, he or she can begin to make good decisions when managing stress.

Parents can help their children learn to be more resilient and to manage the stress that accompanies new challenges by allowing them to feel safe to express their emotions, work on problem-solving skills and practice relaxation techniques. Proper rest, good nutrition and maintenance of daily routines can help boost coping skills.

“A moderate level of stress is normal and helping a child manage and overcome stressful situations will enhance their ability to cope with stress in the future,” says Blanca Orellana, PhD, clinical psychologist, UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center and UCLA Family STAR Clinic. “The time to seek professional help is when any change in behavior persists over a period of time, causes serious anxiety, or causes significant physical or social problems.”

Signs of stress may include:

- Irritability and moodiness
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Muscle tension
- Rapid heartbeat and breathing
- Difficulty separating from caregivers
- Frequent headaches and stomach pains
- Sadness and withdrawal
- Sleep problems
- School problems
- Changes in eating patterns



When to seek help

“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is often used to help children learn stress management skills and to teach them how to better manage their time and find healthier ways to cope,” says Dr. Orellana. “In extreme cases, anti-anxiety medication may be recommended.”

All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. **Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/news.**