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Children Under Stress: How Adults Can Help¹

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Family Stress Affects Children

Today's families are often so complex in structure and their schedules so complicated that stress is inevitably encountered daily. Whatever stress is confronted by the adults in a family has an effect on the children too. Children will face crises during the early years regardless of how protective parents try to be. These crises will result in stress that may manifest itself in a number of behaviors. This sometimes unacceptable behavior of children may further complicate an already tense situation for adults involved. Such a cycle of stress requires intervention to prevent long-term effects on children, and to relieve the situation in which the adults find themselves.

Because children will encounter some crises, it is realistic to help them learn how to cope. Children under stress need help to understand their feelings and control their behavior. Adults can learn to help children do this. The first thing to do is to identify the cause for the stress in the child's life. The following common occurrences may be stressful to a child:

- stress of parents;
- conflict between parents;
- a family's move;
- birth of a baby;
- illness of the child or of either parent;
- death of a family member, friend, or pet.

Behavior May Signal Stress

A second thing to do is learn to recognize physical and verbal stress signals. These actions may mean the child is under stress:

- aggression;
- withdrawal;
- resistance;
- dependency;
- hyperactivity;
- excessive crying;

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- regression in toileting;
- certain speech problems such as stuttering.

When adults observe the behavior of children closely, they soon become skilled at determining when a child is under stress. To discover reasons for children's behavior:

- Listen to their conversations with other children and with adults.
- Observe their interactions with play materials and listen to their comments while playing.
- If the child is in a child care center, ask the child's teacher about her observation of the child.
- Be especially aware of the shy, withdrawn child.
- If you are the child's teacher, talk with the parents.

These techniques can help you understand the child's problem.

Let the Child Know You Care

A third way to help the child cope with stress is to let the child know, through words and actions, that someone cares for him/her as a person. Positive relationships with others are helpful. If you are the child's parents, try the following ways to develop a close relationship.

- Spend some time alone each day with him. Sometimes your presence rather than your words are what the child desires. Really listen to your child.
- Touch him both emotionally and physically, every day.
- Assure him that he does not have to face the difficult situation alone.
- Smile often if you can.
- Assure him that his actions did not cause the stressful event. If the child's actions did cause the event, help him deal with this.

- Offer strength to him through your own inner strength and outward calm. If you can not offer your child this strength, ask a friend to help.
- Give him time to work through this stressful situation.

Help Is Available

Reading books and periodicals and attending educational programs which pertain to helping children cope with such situations can help adults assist children with such stressful events. Seeking the help of psychologists, child psychiatrists, physicians, child development specialists and ministers can also help adults when dealing with such situations.

Care Centers Can Help Too

If you are associated with the child in a child care center or school, you may be able to help by:

- being aware of the parents' feelings and giving them an opportunity to express them if they desire;
- recognizing that parental stress often affects children;
- visiting in the home if invited;
- doing many of the things recommended to parents to help their child through a crisis.

Help children establish good relationships with their peers through some caring activities.

- Help them develop feelings of concern for each other. Do this by noting absences due to illness, or complimenting acts of kindness.
- Ask an established group member to introduce a new group member to new friends and activities.
- Prepare a memory book for children who are planning a move. This might include pictures of friends and favorite activities; words and music to favorite songs and finger plays; and a story about the child and the things she enjoyed at the school.

Talking Can Reduce Stress

Talking about feelings is good for children and adults who are coping with stress. Help children express their feelings by:

- providing for play in a homemaking center or corner;
- encouraging stories about their feelings — a tape recorder may serve to encourage a child to express his feelings;
- participating in one-to-one communication with the child.

Children Need Security

Children under stress particularly need security. Fulfill this need by:

- providing guidelines for behavior;
- providing a regular schedule;
- allowing participation in socially acceptable behavior to express destructive feelings.

Allow children to help make rules they will live with. When they have participated in making rules, they can more readily understand, accept, and feel comfortable with them. Children are also more comfortable with consistent expectations for behavior.

Kindness Aids Good Discipline

When corrections are necessary, be sure that the behavior and not the child is criticized. It is especially important to remember that the self-esteem of a child who is suffering from stress is fragile. Carefully planning the environment for this child is especially important. Understanding the child and utilizing appropriate self-disciplinary measures can help the child learn to cope with stress in positive ways. Try to never humiliate the child by correcting her in public.

Children Need Schedules

Scheduling helps a child feel comfortable. Knowing what to expect and when makes the child feel more secure. This is true whether the child is at home or elsewhere. Families should operate on a schedule. This may include a regular time for meals, bedtime and playtime. If the family is on an irregular schedule, this may be the cause of stress for the child.

Activities Release Negative Feelings

Every person experiences negative feelings at times, and fortunately there are non-destructive activities for expressing these feelings. Some of these activities for children are:

- working with clay;
- fingerpainting;
- woodworking;
- tearing strips of paper or fabric;
- punching bags;
- throwing balls and beanbags;
- bowling;
- kneading dough;
- playing outdoor games.

Provide these activities to help children relieve stress.

Children Must Feel Worthy

Provide children under stress with a feeling of self-worth. The adult who is responsible for helping the child must first have achieved this feeling of being worthy before she can communicate love and self-worth to the child. Certain techniques for helping the child are to:

- emphasize strengths rather than weaknesses;
- give genuine praise for tasks well done;

- show the child that she is unique and has a contribution to make;
- tell the child that she is special;
- accept and respect the child even when she exhibits negative feelings;
- call the child by her name. A person's name designates her as a special person.

Remember, when children are coping with a crisis, their behavior is likely to change. This is a signal that they are under stress. At such a time they need understanding and love. If you are also affected by the same crisis as the child and feel that you are unable to help the child at this time, ask a friend or relative to help.

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