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Grandparents Helping Grandchildren in Times of Stress

Childhood stress has many sources. Both positive and negative events contribute to stress. Stress is part of life. Many children experience stress as a result of common changes, such as starting school or day care, the birth of a new baby, illness, separation or divorce, change of parent's employment, moving to a new location, or death in the family.

Other stresses are unusual and traumatic. Children may be homeless, live in fear from violence in their schools or neighborhoods, or be survivors of natural disasters. They may be children having children. Drugs, alcohol, and/or abuse may be a part of their lives.

Recognizing that stress exists and ensuring that basic physical needs are met is important. Rather than trying to shield children from all stress, provide them with basic coping skills to prepare for the future challenges of life. Grandparents can be effective role models of how to cope with stress for their grandchildren.

Symptoms to Look For

It is important to remember that children go through change as a natural part of their development. No two children or situations are exactly alike. Children may benefit from different types of support.

Look for behaviors that are not the norm for the child. Noticeable emotional, social, physical, and intellectual changes may be a signal to check out the possibility of stress as a factor.

Emotionally, a child under stress may appear more fearful, sensitive, tense, aggressive, greedy, angry, restless, and/or irritable. If a child does not know why he or she feels this way, stress could be a factor.

Socially, a child under stress may be more aggressive or withdrawn. Both of these symptoms can lead to feelings of isolation, which may increase stress levels.

Physically, children under stress may be more prone to accidents, illness, ulcers, and/or headaches. They may have lower

energy levels, and trouble with constipation or diarrhea even though they are healthy. They may grind their teeth during sleep.

Intellectually, children under stress may be easily distracted or restless. They may have difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Their expression may seem dull or vacant. They may be preoccupied with images of monsters or other threats, and/or day dream more than usual.

Some Ways to Help

1. Set realistic expectations for the child's developmental level.
2. Contribute to the child's positive self esteem by providing encouragement.
3. Nurture and cherish the child. Say "I love you." Give a hug. Accept them for who they are.
4. Guide children by letting them know when behavior is acceptable. Verbally recognize positive behavior.
5. When unacceptable behavior occurs, redirect children by stating their options. Help them find acceptable ways to express negative feelings.
6. Communicate using I messages: When _____ I feel _____ because _____.
7. Take the time to develop mutual respect and trust.
8. Listen to what the child is saying. Look at what you think the child's body language is telling you. Then take time to talk with the child.
9. Model appropriate ways to deal with stress and change.
10. Spend time together. Interact with the child. Make use of each opportunity to share time, heritage, thoughts, and experiences.
11. Allow the child to help you when appropriate. Be patient as it may take longer to complete the task when the child is helping you.
12. Discipline using logical consequences. Limit use of "time out."
13. Provide a space for their things while children are with you.
14. Remember the value of laughter.
15. Encourage the parent to seek professional help.

Sources

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