

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **STRESS AND CHILDREN: WHAT IT IS AND HOW PARENTS CAN HELP**

### **What is stress?**

Stress is experienced by all people – it is the innate reaction to everyday challenges or threats. Stress is normal and can be either helpful or harmful. When experienced in brief episodes, stress can be a positive motivator. For example, it can help push a child to study for a quiz or test, or to complete his/her homework. When stress is experienced for an extended period, however, it can become debilitating and lead to difficulties with family, peers, and school work. In these situations, adult intervention is likely required. Stress can be caused by both internal and external circumstances, such as an individual's genetic makeup, environment, behavior, thoughts, or life situation.

### **What causes stress?**

Some experiences will be stressful to children at any age, such as family conflict, death of a loved one, parental divorce, changes in school, and violence or trauma in the community. At different ages, however, there are specific experiences that may cause added stress. In early childhood being without a primary caregiver, attending school, or strange situations may cause discomfort. In middle childhood, a child may feel heightened stress as a result of increased school demands and increased peer pressure. Adolescents may experience increased stress due to social factors, romantic relationships, and the need to achieve. It is also important to note that even seemingly positive experiences can also cause stress in children, including the birth of a sibling, school graduation, and being singled out for a personal achievement.

### **What can I do as a parent?**

The way parents respond to emotional situations significantly affects how well children learn to cope with their emotions. Children are continually learning how to care for themselves and need guidance in how to express and understand their feelings. Children who learn positive coping skills, such as stress reduction and relaxation, are better able to respond to and recover from difficult situations. This ability will serve them not only in childhood and adolescence but in adulthood as well, and will benefit their physical health and academic/work performance. Positive coping skills will likely also decrease anxiety and behavior problems, while increasing self-control, self-confidence, and positive interpersonal relations. Parents can encourage effective stress reduction and relaxation in the following ways:

- ❑ The first step to reducing stress is helping your child become aware of when he/she is experiencing stress. The experience of stress exhibits itself in three ways: Physiological (increased heart rate, headaches, nausea), Behavioral (disturbed sleep, getting easily annoyed, being avoidant), and Cognitive (difficulty concentrating, worrying, negative thinking). By helping your child learn to identify when he/she is experiencing stress, your child will learn when stress reducing or relaxation activities would be useful.
- ❑ Help your child learn deep breathing – this is a highly effective way to decrease stress. Practice breathing in deeply and then breathing out slowly. Repeat this a few times. With younger children deep breathing can be easily practiced when they are put to bed.
- ❑ Progressive muscle relaxation is another effective relaxation technique. Focus on an area of the body, such as the arms, and tense them as much as possible for a count of ten. Then release the muscles for a

count of ten. Progress through the major areas of the body (legs, arms, shoulders, etc.). This too can be practiced before going to sleep.

- Other relaxation techniques include meditation, yoga, listening to soft music, and visualization.
- Further, there are many daily activities that can lower stress, such as regular exercise, engaging in hobbies, or spending time with peers.
- Finally, parents can be very helpful by staying attuned with their children's emotional experiences, asking how they are doing, and providing an environment in which they feel comfortable talking about how they feel.

### **When should I seek professional help?**

Learning to cope with stress is an important part of growing up. Children develop varying abilities to manage these feelings and, while some kids seem to not be slowed by stress, others require more direct guidance and support. If your child seems to be overly stressed or irritable and seems to be having a difficult time controlling these experiences then your child may need the intervention of a mental health professional. When left untreated, chronic stress can lead to many troubles, including decreased social and academic functioning, an increased risk of depression, increased blood pressure, asthma, gastrointestinal problems, a decreased immune system, as well as worsening and/or triggering preexisting medical conditions. Therefore, it is important that appropriate steps be taken if you suspect your child is having a difficult time managing stress. A mental health professional will be able to evaluate the underlying causes and triggers of your child's stress and can teach your child specialized skills. Guidance and support can also be provided to you, as a parent, as well as to your child's teachers. A small number of children have such a difficult time dealing with stress that they engage in self-harming behaviors (cutting, suicidal gestures, drug/alcohol use). Children who engage in these behaviors require immediate attention.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
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