

# Stress

## What is Stress?

You probably think of stress as part of your life, but maybe not your baby's. After all, an infant peacefully asleep or a toddler joyfully at play makes childhood look like...child's play. But think about it. Who encounters more change, more mystery, more that is new on a daily basis: you or your young child? Childhood is indeed full of stress – not all of it harmful – but enough that parents ought to understand it.

**STRESS** is our physical reaction to things that happen around us that make us feel threatened. When faced with such events, the body responds with both a physical and emotional reaction that sends out an “alarm signal.” The things that cause stress are often called **stressors**.

## Stress itself in neither good nor bad.

Stress is merely part of living in a complex, changing world. It occurs when we are faced with unfamiliar environments or situations, or with actual danger. Learning to cope with stress is an important step in your child's development, and one which you can influence.

Since stress is part of everyday life, your job as a parent is to understand how your child responds to stress. There are three possible responses to stress that affect children: positive, tolerable and toxic. We will address the two most common responses below. The third type of response, called toxic, occurs rarely and is typically the result of long-term exposure to severe adversity

As described here, “positive” and “tolerable” refer to the stress response system's effects on the body, not to the stressful event or experience itself:



- ★ **POSITIVE:** Brief elevation in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels. Stressors that cause this response can be beneficial, as it often occurs when a child overcomes a minor fear, such as getting a shot or starting at a new school.
- ★ **TOLERABLE:** Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships. This response is caused by more serious stressors, such as the loss of a loved one or a serious injury. The potentially damaging effects of such stress can be offset by the comfort and support of caregivers, whose own coping skills both nurture and teach the child.

## Why Stress Matters

**Stress matters simply because it is an unavoidable part of everyone's life.**

- ★ Your job as a parent is not to eliminate or shield the child from all stress, but to learn to recognize it and comfort the child in ways that help the child deal with it effectively.



## What Parents Can Do

### STRESS AND INFANTS:

- ★ Be aware of your child's stress level, and help reduce stress when possible.
  - Symptoms of stress in an infant may include: unusual fussiness, difficulty feeding, withdrawal, or not using typical cues. Crying can, but does not always, indicate a stress response.
- ★ Help your child manage her stress.
  - Sensitive care in the first year of life helps infants gradually regulate stress because they eventually learn ways to self-soothe.
  - Infants can't regulate their own stress responses; during their first year, they rely on caregivers to help them become calm. This is why parents should pick up and comfort a crying baby.

### STRESS AND TODDLERS / PRESCHOOLERS:

- ★ Tune in to your child's behavior.
  - A change in overall demeanor or attitude could be a symptom of stress. When a normally outgoing child becomes quiet and withdrawn, or when a typically quiet child becomes disruptive, parents should take notice and try to determine the possible cause.
- ★ Remember that relationships help buffer stress!
  - Children are not independent individuals. They thrive because of relationships. Relationships teach them how to self-soothe, name emotions, understand what they feel, know they are loved, and try opportunities for exploration and independence.
- ★ When your child is unhappy, make an effort not just to calm and support him, but to teach him about his emotions; a child experiencing even unpleasant emotions is in an excellent position to learn about coping.
- ★ Encourage play that includes role-playing. It helps children understand how it feels to communicate feelings, follow rules, cooperate, and be part of a group – all of which can help them manage stress better.