



Stress in Kids: The Good, the Bad, and How to Cope

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life



Signs your child is stressed out

Bad stress can release mood-altering hormones, making a child feel irritable and detached. But not everyone shows stress in the same way—or even the same way from day to day. Look out for changes in a child's behavior, such as:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Disrupted sleep
- Excessive worrying
- Chronic headaches or stomachaches
- Avoidance of school or other activities your child used to enjoy
- Emotional eating

Stress is a necessary—and sometimes positive—force in a child's life. The nervousness they feel before stepping up to the block at a swim meet will help them ace that job interview in another decade. The demands of school will prepare them for the demands of a career. And so on.

But for kids and adults alike, stress can easily overflow and become unhealthy. Here's how to tell when your child is overly stressed out—and what you can do to help.

The difference between good and bad stress

Let's start with the good: good stress is motivating and beneficial. It helps us to learn, grow, be productive and meet daily goals. For kids, good stress might be joining a sports team, running for a student council position or adjusting to the birth of a sibling. Bad stress often comes from bad situations: a family conflict, bullying or scary world events (e.g., school shootings), to name a few. It can also happen when otherwise good stress—such as the desire to do well in school—spirals out of control. Good and bad stress can have a similar effect on the body. Kids might have an elevated heart rate if they find out they are going on an exciting family vacation and when they hear their parents argue.

Teaching healthy coping skills

Not everyone is born with that chin-up attitude toward challenges, but everyone can learn skills to make them more resilient (able to handle life's ups and downs). Baumstein shares a few of her favorites:

- Physical activity! Stretch, go for a walk or put on some music and dance
- Practicing deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Journaling, singing, drawing or other creative outlets
- Guided imagery

Practice these activities with your child. If you notice she had a rough day at school, go for a walk, play a game or take deep breaths together. Come up with a list of coping skills and try them out as a family.

Other ways to ease your child's stress

Be a healthy role model. Be open with your kids about what stresses you out and how you cope with it—the good ways (e.g., exercising, reading a book, etc.) and sometimes the not-so-good ways (e.g. eating poorly).

Take care of your child's body as well as mind. Prioritize good nutrition, sleep and physical activity, which are all important for managing stress.

A simple, powerful way to lighten your child's load is to simply listen. Some kids (especially teenagers) may not be quick to share their feelings, but when they do, pay attention and don't cut in. Then repeat back exactly what they said without twisting their words or minimizing their concerns.