



Identifying signs of stress in your children and teens

Young people experience stress from a variety of sources. Some stress can be positive, but too much stress is overwhelming. Tuning into emotional or behavioral cues is important in identifying potential problems.

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Young people, like adults, experience stress. It can come from a variety of sources including doing well in school, making and sustaining friendships, or managing perceived expectations from their parents, teachers, or coaches. Some stress can be positive in that it provides the energy to tackle a big test, presentation, or sports event.

Too much stress, however, can create unnecessary hardship and challenge. Adults can sometimes be unaware when their children or teens are experiencing overwhelming feelings of stress. Tuning into emotional or behavioral cues is important in identifying potential problems and working with your young person to provide guidance and support to successfully work through difficult times.

Here are some tips from APA on ways to recognize possible signs of stress.

Watch for negative changes in behavior

Youth of all ages, but especially younger children, may find it difficult to recognize and verbalize when they are experiencing stress.

For children, stress can manifest itself through changes in behavior. Common changes can include acting irritable or moody, withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure, routinely expressing worries, complaining more than usual about school, crying, displaying surprising fearful reactions, clinging to a parent or teacher, sleeping too much or too little, or eating too much or too little.

With teens, while spending more time with and confiding in peers is a normal part of growing up, significantly avoiding parents, abandoning long-time friendships for a new set of peers, or expressing excessive hostility toward family members, may indicate that the teen is experiencing significant stress. While negative behavior is not always linked to excessive stress, negative changes in behavior are almost always a clear indication that something is wrong. Adults will want to pay attention to these behaviors and determine an appropriate response or intervention.

Understand that “feeling sick” may be caused by stress

Stress can also appear in physical symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches. If a child makes excessive trips to the school nurse or complains of frequent stomachaches or headaches (when they have been given a clean bill of health by their physician), or if these complaints increase in certain situations (e.g., before a big test) that child may be experiencing significant stress.

Be aware of how your child or teen interacts with others

Sometimes a child or teen may seem like his or her usual self at home but be acting out in unusual ways in other settings. It is important for parents to network with one another so that they can come to know how the child or teen is doing in the world around them. In addition to communicating with other parents, being in contact with teachers, school administrators, and leaders of extracurricular activities can help parents tap into their child or teen's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and be aware of any sources of concern.

Listen and translate

Because children are often not familiar with the word stress and its meaning, they may express feelings of distress through other words such as "worried," "confused," "annoyed," and "angry." Children and teens may also express feelings of stress by saying negative things about themselves, others, or the world around them (e.g. "No one likes me," "I'm stupid," "Nothing is fun."). It is important for parents to listen for these words and statements and try to figure out why your child or teen is saying them and whether they seem to indicate a source or sources of stress.

Seek support

Parents, children, and teens do not need to tackle overwhelming stress on their own. If a parent is concerned that his or her child or teen is experiencing significant symptoms of stress on a regular basis, including, but not limited to those described above, it can be helpful to work with a licensed mental health professional, such as a psychologist. Psychologists have special training to help people identify problems and develop effective strategies to resolve overwhelming feelings of stress.

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