

THE MEDICAL NEWS™

Helping People Get The Healthcare They Need

1-800-MDNEWS1

Northern Virginia

November 1999

Talking With Children About Stress

By Kay F. Walkinshaw, RHA

Today, even kindergartners face pressures of which their parents may not be aware. Academic and social competition, divorced parents and confusion over sex and drugs are sources of stress for children who are too young to deal adequately with such things. A child suffering from stress may not be able to identify what is bothering her. Parents need to watch for the warning signs of stress, in their children.

Warning Signs of Stress

Youngsters react to stress in various ways. Some may spend more time than usual on their homework, never being able to "get it right." Others may simply give up in frustration. Children feeling social anxiety may withdraw from friends. When a child is under stress of any sort, he may act anxious or depressed and can no longer cope with situations he once handled well.

When Parents' Stress Affects a Child

Children are more sensitive to their environment than many parents realize. Your marital, financial or job-related stresses can affect them. If this happens, try to reassure them that you are strong enough to handle the situation. No matter how bad things get, try not to use your child as a sympathetic ear by telling her all your troubles. Although some youngsters may seem calm and impervious to stress, no child has the inner resources for dealing with stress that an adult does.



Kay F. Walkinshaw, RHA

Love and caring among family members is one way of getting through difficult times.

What You Can Do

The best way for parents to help their children avoid stress is through unconditional love—the kind that says, "I will love you no matter what." If your child knows you will love them even if they do not get an "A" on the next exam, they are less likely to feel overwhelmed by school work. If the stress has an identifiable cause—for instance, procrastinating on school assignments—you can work with them to help them avoid the problem in the future.

See that your child gets some form of regular physical activity. 30 to 45 minutes per day would be great. It has proven to act as a powerful natural antidepressant by causing the release of "feel-good" chemicals called endorphins, increasing levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, offering distraction from negative thoughts, increasing resistance to

stress and enhancing self-esteem.

Suggest that your child practice some form of relaxation. Even a very young child is capable of enjoying a guided progressive relaxation. You or the hypnotherapist must use some creativity in setting up and doing the exercise. There are several good relaxation tapes available at stores who cater to children. Some are guided relaxation while others are recorded with a certain "beat" within the music. Get a variety and see what your child prefers.

Avoid drugs which may include alcohol and antihistamines. Limit their intake of caffeinated sodas and other forms of caffeine which can interfere with normal moods. Caffeine, as some of us have experienced, can cause insomnia. Do not smoke around children. Nicotine can have mood-altering effects' especially in children.

Pay attention to your teen's depression. It is important to recognize signs of depression in this age group. Look for increased irritability rather than just a "bad mood". Some may complain of physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. Some may exhibit behavioral problems like fighting or having trouble at school. Look for dramatic changes in personality. An outgoing child who becomes quiet and withdrawn may be suffering from depression. If you suspect your teen is depressed, share your concerns and seek help. Do not become confrontational and defensive. Above all, love your children and let them know it.