

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

As a parent, you may have questioned why your child sometimes exhibits new or different behaviors. It may be due to stress. Children can be affected adversely by what may seem to adults like “little” things such as holidays, a new home or car, a new sibling, a new daily routine, a new caregiver or a change in the family structure. If you think your child may be stressed, observe them carefully for these signs*, which may appear for a short time, go away or last awhile:

- Changes in eating, sleeping or bathroom habits
- Increased separation anxiety from parents or teachers
- Bad dreams or extended crying spells
- Nail-biting, thumb-sucking or hair-pulling
- Feeling sick, i.e. headaches, stomach aches
- Chewing on clothing or other items
- Wanting to be alone or withdrawn from others
- Increased aggressive behavior or “acting out”

How can we help our children cope with stress?

- Encourage children to express their feelings. Let them know that it is okay to feel the way they do. Support them and allow for “quiet time” where they can be alone to think.
- During stressful times, lower your expectations and avoid putting children under too much pressure.
- Provide nutritious foods and plenty of rest. Try relaxation exercises such as breathing, stretching or listening to soothing music.
- Avoid “busy” schedules and consistently maintain your daily routines. Children feel safe and secure when their routines remain the same.
- Encourage drawing, painting or writing. Children need creative outlets to express their feelings. Encourage movement, dancing and physical exercises. Physical activity also decreases stress.
- Encourage puppet or doll play. Children will be able to create a reality they can control and recreate stressful events in ways they can manage.

Most importantly, express your unconditional love to your children, paying close, respectful attention to what they tell or show you they need from you.

*Note: If a child shows excessive signs of stress for long periods, it is in the best interest of the child to seek professional advice and support.