

**The Monster in the Closet:
Understanding Stress in
Young Children**



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What causes stress in children

- Big changes – moving to a new home, starting school or daycare.
- Social issues – being teased, bullied, feeling different or left out.
- Feeling unliked or unloved by parents, family members or others.
- Conflict within the family.
- Schedules that are too busy.
- Problems with school work

Signs of Stress

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- Trouble eating, relaxing or sleeping.
- Increased clinginess, whining, crying or fighting.
- Recurring headaches, tummy aches or neck pain.
- Increased irritability, sadness, panic, anger, anxiety.

Continued

- Becoming withdrawn – avoiding family & friends.
- Increased behavior problems such as biting, kicking, poor listening, acting out, impulsiveness.
- Nervous habits like nail biting, hair twisting, thumb sucking. • Overreacting to minor problems (ex: yelling, crying, shutting down).
- Unusually low energy or high energy & restlessness.

Stress Relievers

- Establish morning routines to get the day off to a good start.
- Provide healthy food to promote a healthy mind & body.
- Make sure they get exercise & time to play.
- Spend time with them & ask them how they feel.
- Give hugs & kisses to show you love them.

Continued

- Ensure that their lives are not too busy. Some kids need more 'down time' than others.
- Have fun together. A good laugh helps fight off stress.
- Maintain bedtime routines to help them relax & get enough sleep. A tired child stresses more easily.
- Teach them to take slow, deep breaths in stressful moments. Even young children can relax this way

The worried child: age-appropriate insecurity or a symptom of an anxiety disorder?

- Only recently have anxiety disorders have been recognized in children .
- When fear-related or avoidance behavior prevents the child from doing the things which he would otherwise do.
- For instance separation anxiety in a two-year-old could well be transient; in an older child, it is a disorder.
- Children go through phases of obsessive behavior; when it goes beyond the norm, it is a disorder.



Defining Mental Health in Children

- ✓The symptoms occur often and last a long, long time.
- ✓The symptoms are present in more than one setting.
- ✓The symptoms cause distress and impair normal functioning

Factors that influence a child's mental health

- Temperment and genetic predisposition
- Relationships with family and other caregivers
- Culture
- Environment



Physical Factors

- Pregnancy
- Long-term illness
- Exposure to toxins



Emotional Qualities

- Sensitivity
- Attention Span
- Activity Level
- Distractability
- Intensity of reactions
- Daily routine (eating, sleeping etc)



Family Issues

- Bonding
- Self-Esteem
- Self Regulation





Activity
One Little Word- How what we say can change how someone reacts!

What is emotional well-being?

1. Attachment Bonding- affection- There is an adult who cares for me
2. Affiliation- Be and have a friend
3. Self-regulation- I can control my own behavior
4. Initiative- Desire to explore
5. Problem solving- given novel situations can I apply what I know
6. Respect for self and others



Anxiety Symptoms		
Post traumatic stress disorder	Separation Anxiety Disorder	General Anxiety Disorder
Trauma event Nightmares /night terrors Talks about trauma Withdraws Startles easily Loses Skills Aggressive	Struggles against separation beyond the appropriate age to do so. Can't be soothed after adult leaves Follows caregiver around all the time, does Will not explore surroundings Clingy Nightmares	Worries all the time Needs lots of reassurance Difficulty sitting still. Easily distracted Irritable

Characteristics of PTSD

Post traumatic stress disorder:

- Child must have been exposed to a traumatic event and
- must have experienced symptoms for more than one month.



Class PTSD Symptoms

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child expresses at least one of the following <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Uses play to reenact the trauma ✓ Continues to discuss the event ✓ Frequent terrors at night including vivid nightmares ✓ Child becomes physically ill when triggered about event ✓ Flashbacks and periods of "spacing out" | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Child withdraws from the world and pulls into himself <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Interacts less and less with others ✓ Shows no or grossly inappropriate emotions ✓ Shows decreased interest in daily routines ✓ Avoids people and events that remind him of the trauma |
|---|---|

Continued....

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Child seems tense and 'edgy' in at least 2 areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sleep- either sleeps too long, too little or does not stay asleep ✓ Distracted by insignificant things ✓ Hypervigilance-overly aware of small environmental changes ✓ Outbursts of tantrums or anger ✓ Startles easily at happy things | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Other possible symptoms (not always present) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Loss of previously acquired skills ✓ Becoming aggressive or violent ✓ Afraid of things that did not scare him/her before or things that are not normally feared by children. |
|---|---|

Solutions

- Help child feel safe
- Help child manage and identify emotions
- When possible help the child understand what has happened
- Answer questions as frankly as often as they are asked
- Help the child regain a sense of control
- Teach the child to recognize triggers



Separation Anxiety Disorder



- Persistent unrealistic fear that some destructive event will happen preventing the return of the adult or that the adult will not return at all.
- Something will happen to increase the child's separation from the adult.
- Unwillingness to sleep without the adult
- Avoidance in being left alone
- Physical manifestations-stomach ache, headache, vomiting etc.
- Repeated signs of distress-tantrums, crying, pleading not to leave.
- Repeated need to talk to adult, call, see, talk to etc.

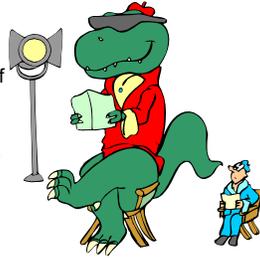
Solutions



- Help child feel safe and reassured that the adult will return.
- Help child develop social skills to cope with being left
- Encourage routines that build security
- Make sure child has time to transition and calm down

General Anxiety Disorder

- Worry about things that are not real
- Worry and interpretations of past events that are not realistic
- Somatic (physical) ailments unrelated to anything
- Tension
- Needs reassurance constantly
- Difficulty relaxing



Solutions

- Help children learn problem solving
- Develop routines that foster independence
- Keep the child engaged and involved in activities
- Don't discount his issues but don't 'play into' them either
- Be consistent yet patient with the child-remember it is real to him!

Personality Traits Consistent with Anxiety Disorder

- Highly developed sense of responsibility
- Perfectionistic
- High expectations
- Oversensitivity to criticism
- "Shoulds"
- Strong control issues
- Difficulty relaxing
- Tendency to please
- Difficulty with assertiveness
- Frequent worries
- All-or-nothing thinking (no shades of gray)



Goals for the Teacher

1. Rationalize yet empathize with what the child is feeling
2. Relabel the problem
3. Rewire and resist
4. Refocus
5. Reinforce
6. Reward



Communication

- Communicate honestly and openly
- Make sure the child understands what you are trying to say.
- Don't always assume that the child can just 'get over' what is going on with him

What the teacher can do to help!

1. Relaxation techniques
2. SBR- Stop-Breath-Relax
3. Make a list of things that are relaxing
4. Draw what you worry about
5. Talk about what you worry about
6. Have a worry box where you put your worry.
7. Talk-time-worry-time-work-time approach
8. Talk back to your worries
9. Move your body
10. Music
11. Select a favorite activity
12. Creative visualization



What the teacher can to help herself/himself

1. Find out as much as possible about the child
2. Work with the child's parents
3. Don't diagnose
4. Be consistent
5. Don't encourage learned helplessness
6. Don't discount the child's feelings or minimize his fears.
7. Make the enviroment as relaxing as possible.

Social Emotional

1. Confidence
2. Curiosity
3. Intentionality
4. Self-control
5. Relatedness
6. Capacity to communicate
7. Cooperativeness



