

Stress and Anxiety in Kids

Stress

Did you know that children, even at a very young age can be affected by stress?



Stress of one kind or another is part of everyone's daily life. Every child responds differently to stress depending on their individual temperament. Some kids may seem easy going and able to breeze through most experiences while others develop intense feelings and reactions to every new thing.

- Stress for kids can range from *homework to the death of a caregiver. From bullies and peer pressure to family domestic violence and substance addictions. Fear of new foods to not enough food in the home.*

Not all stress is bad! Think of a baby being challenged to learn to walk or a kind coach encouraging a teenager to improve at their chosen sport. **This is good stress.** Successfully managing stressful situations or events enhances a child's ability to cope with stress in the future. It helps them develop resilience and learn how to deal with life's bumps. It helps them develop the tools to handle future challenges.



Bad Stress is when the stress is very intense, negative, or continuous. This can take a toll on the mind and body. When stress persists, it can make a child more susceptible to illness, physical symptoms (like headaches and tummy aches), sleep problems and depression.

How can you help your child deal with stress?

- *First get to know your child's temperament and sensitivities well.* Some kids will waltz right into new situations without a problem and others will need a lot of support, reassurance, and preparation. Do they respond well to competitive banter or pressure from a coach? Or do they wilt and withdraw at that kind of thing? Support and encourage them in the way they respond to best.
- All children improve in their ability to handle stress if they:
 - Have emotional support from family and friends
 - Have a strong sense of self-esteem and self-compassion
 - Have previously succeeded in managing challenges and feel able to do so

If you need specific ways to help your child manage stress, talk with your child's doctor and consider a referral for behavioral health.

Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is feeling worried or scared. Some amount of anxiety is *developmentally normal*. For example, when infants develop the normal fear of strangers, toddlers fear the dark and monsters under the bed, and school age children worry about a storm or natural disasters. Teenagers usually worry about school and peer relationships.



Developmentally appropriate fears **become a problem** if they do not improve with time or if they are severe enough to *interfere with the child's daily functioning*. (For instance, anxiety causing refusal to go to school).



Many kids have anxiety, and many kids have anxiety disorders (they are the most common type of psychiatric disorders in children.) It is important to help early on if you notice that your child has symptoms of anxiety that is starting to interfere with their life.

What are some symptoms of anxiety in children?

- Feeling their heart is racing
- Sweating or blushing, feeling very hot or very cold
- Shaking or feeling sick to their stomach
- Trouble paying attention or sitting still
- Excessive fidgeting (or touching the crotch area for young boys)

What are some symptoms of anxiety disorders in children?

- Worries causing poor sleep, difficulty getting to sleep, or frequent nightmares
- Chronic tummy pain, headaches, or other pain
- Avoidance behavior, restless agitation, worsening school performance, behavioral difficulties, obsessive behaviors

What should I do if I think my child has anxiety or might have an anxiety disorder?

- **Talk to your child's doctor** about your concerns, *there are many different tools to help with anxiety and the earlier we start to use them, the better the outcome*
- *If the symptoms are mild* (the anxiety is noticeable but the child functions ok)
 - Try to reduce stress, but remember they still need to face fears like going to school. Avoidance will usually make anxiety worse
 - Try increasing your connection with your child. Schedule one on one time with them, ask and listen—find out what is worrying them

- Practice deep breathing (learn when the child is not worried so they know how to do it when the anxiety comes on!)
- Practice muscle relaxation
- Praise your child and help them learn positive self-talk (“I can try this” instead of (“I can’t do this”))
- Sometimes it is helpful to talk to a behavioral health specialist to help you learn and develop these skills –ask your doctor to refer you!
- **If the symptoms are more severe** your doctor might recommend *ongoing therapy* for your child and *consider medication*
- If you need help finding a mental health provider for your child contact WA mental health referral service for children and teens.
 - [PAL and WA Mental Health Referral Service for Children and Teens \(seattlechildrens.org\)](https://seattlechildrens.org)

Additional resources

Anxiety resources for families:

[Washington PAL Care Guide \(2024 v.12\).pdf \(seattlechildrens.org\)](https://seattlechildrens.org)

[Frequently Asked Questions \(aacap.org\)](https://www.aacap.org) Anxiety resource center from the AACAP

[anxiety-parents-medication-guide.pdf \(aacap.org\)](https://www.aacap.org)

Deep breathing and relaxation guide

[Kids How to Relax When You Need to Relax - MC2923 \(mayoclinic.org\)](https://www.mayoclinic.org)

Spanish language resources

[sp-family-anxiety-resources.pdf \(seattlechildrens.org\)](https://seattlechildrens.org)

[sp-family-relaxation-resources.pdf \(seattlechildrens.org\)](https://seattlechildrens.org)

References

Healthychildren.org

[Helping Children Handle Stress - HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)

[Help Your Child Manage Anxiety: Tips for Home & School - HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)

SeattleChildrens.org

AACAP.org (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry)