

Child Reactions to Stress (Birth – 6 years)

It's hard to predict how a child will react to stress and transitions. Learning more about how reactions may vary depending on a child's age can help parents and caregivers better support the child. The following are common reactions you can expect to see in a very young child.



Infants • 12 Months and Younger

Infants are likely to respond to changes in their schedule, physical environment, or in the availability of caregivers. Such disruptions in infant care can lead to refusal to eat, weight loss, frequent crying, or difficulty being consoled. Caregiver distress may also have an impact on infant activities and reactions.



Toddlers • 1 - 3 Years

Toddlers generally take cues from their primary caregiver. If one or both parents are coping well, a toddler is likely to cope well. When adjusting to change, a toddler may become more tearful, throw temper tantrums, or experience shifts in eating and sleeping patterns.



Preschoolers • 3 - 6 Years

Preschoolers have a clearer awareness of family stress and transitions than younger children. When experiencing such stress, a preschool-aged child may become clingy, suck their thumb more often, wet the bed, have changes in sleep patterns, or experience anxiety around separation from parents. They may display signs of irritability, low energy, moodiness, and aggression, or they may complain of headaches, stomachaches, and sleep problems. Due to their active imaginations, preschoolers may develop their own explanations about stress and family transitions, e.g., "We moved because I was bad."

What caregivers can do:

- **It can be tough to balance** the needs of a young child while taking good care of yourself. Use play dates and support from others to help. Making sure you are taking care of yourself will help both you and your child cope with transitions and stress.
- **Try to maintain** the child's routines as much as possible. It is important to maintain consistent activities, such as school, play groups, and stable bed time and mealtime routines. Introducing any changes in routine gradually, rather than abruptly, may help prevent challenges and increase your child's ability to cope with transitions and stressful times.
- **You can reassure a young child** by providing positive attention and affection (hugging, kissing, cuddling).
- **Set aside time to play.** Play is how children learn about the world. Also, having fun reinforces their positive relationship with you.
- **If a young child feels** that they are the cause of stressful events, you can gently correct these beliefs. These can best be addressed through simple, matter-of fact, but accurate, information.

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Child Reactions to Stress (6–12 years old)

It's hard to predict how a child will react to family stress and transitions. Learning more about how reactions may vary depending on a child's age can help parents/caregivers better support their child. Here are some possible reactions you can expect to see in school aged children.



School-Aged Children • 6–12 Years

Often times, school-aged children worry about separations from important caregivers and transitions. They wonder who will be available to take care of them and may be concerned about the safety of their caregivers.

Much like younger children, school-aged children may act out their feelings with moodiness, irritability, or whining.

Children ages 6 – 12 years old may express worry and concern in physical ways. This can include complaints of stomachaches and headaches with no apparent illness.

School-aged children understand some of the realities of stressors.

What you can do:

- Help your children feel safe and secure by keeping routines, schedules and expectations (at school and home) as consistent as possible. When kids know what to expect they do better.
- Listen to your children. Accept communication of worries and other feelings and use it to encourage communication within your family.
- Provide clear, developmentally appropriate information regarding the stressor(s). Do your best to talk openly with your child so that they have the correct information.
- Ask open-ended questions to get a better sense of what children understand and are ready to learn more about. For example, you might ask, “What do you think about your parents getting a divorce?” “How do you feel about living in a new neighborhood?” “Tell me what you understand about your mom’s illness.”
- Be honest when addressing your children’s concerns; but be sure that conversations are appropriate for their age and level of understanding.
- It’s okay to admit that you don’t know the answers to certain things or that you need time to think about how to answer tough questions. Be sure to get back to children later, once you’ve had time to think about how you want to address difficult challenges or concerns.
- Reassure your children that they are loved by their family members. It’s important for children to hear this on a regular basis.
- Talk to your children about their entire network of support, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, and other important people in their lives. Understanding that they have many forms of support can help kids feel more secure.

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Child Reactions to Stress (13–18 years old)

It's hard to predict how a child will react to family stress and transitions. Learning more about how reactions may vary depending on a child's age can help parents/caregivers better support their child. Here are some possible reactions you can expect to see in teenagers.

Teenagers • 13–18 Years



Teens typically have greater awareness about stressors. They may worry about the possible consequences of stressors.

Teenagers are sensitive to the reactions of their peers. They may feel confused or isolated if people express negative opinions about their stressors.

It is common for teenagers to demonstrate irritability, rebelliousness, or other challenging behaviors. These actions may be heightened during times of family change.

Changes can be more difficult than with younger kids as teens may have a hard time readjusting to the impact of stress(ors), such as shifts in family roles, responsibilities, and rules.

What you can do:

- Listen, be honest, and maintain open communication with your teens. They understand many stressors and can also understand the importance of using practical coping skills.
- Model healthy behaviors and expression of emotions. It is useful for teens to see how you handle sadness, worry, and concern in helpful ways.
- Set clear and realistic expectations regarding functioning at school and home.
- Look for any signs of high-risk behavior, including sexual acting out or substance, including alcohol, use. Talk to your teens about other strategies for expressing themselves or calming themselves down.
- Help teenagers identify and access their extended support systems, such as friends or other trusted and caring adults. Sometimes, teens will not share information with a parent for fear of causing more worry. Having another adult to talk to can provide the teen with a safe place to more openly share their concerns.
- If changes to routines occur, try to involve your teens in the discussion, preparation, and planning.
- Teens may need to find a new balance between family time and their usual activities. At times, teens may need to prioritize family events over activities and at other times, it may help them to spend time with friends, in school, or social activities.

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