

Children and Stress: Are You Pushing Your Child Too Hard?

Often a child appears to be very grown up and able to handle responsibility—he or she may even seem like a "miniature adult." However, parents may inadvertently treat their children as adults too early and hurry them along in the process of growing up. Parents need to watch for the possibility that their child has been given too much responsibility and is being pushed too hard.

Pressures on Children

Most often during the middle childhood years, children feel pressures from a number of sources. They may feel pressure from within themselves, from parents, from teachers and peers, and from society. Children must respond to and adapt to these pressures.

Children typically welcome some events, while others are more difficult for them to take on. As children continue to grow, they may be more able to express opinions and concerns about their activities. Early in the middle childhood years, however, a child's commitment and stress level often are controlled by a parent or adult.

Young school-age children will sometimes express their feelings directly. Some children, however, may internalize stress and show it through sadness, depression, or withdrawal. Other children may express feelings of stress outwardly and begin to misbehave.

Signs of Over commitment

Stress is a part of life and growing up, but adults need to keep a watchful eye on children and intervene when they sense something is undermining a child's physical or psychological well-being.

Here are some signs that stress may be having a negative impact on a child:

- The child develops physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomach pains.
- The child seems restless, tired, and agitated.
- The child appears depressed and will not communicate how he or she feels.
- The child seems less interested in an activity that was once very important to him or her, such as baseball or dance class.
- The child's grades begin to fall, and he or she has less interest than usual in attending classes and doing homework.
- The child exhibits antisocial behavior, such as lying and stealing, forgets or refuses to do chores, and seems more dependent on the parent than in the past.

Helping the Child Cope

Once a child becomes involved in an activity, it is important that the parent be supportive, but not pushy. A parent can offer praise and show interest by attending the activity, but allow the child the opportunity to change interests based on his or her desires.

When children are younger, they commonly need help balancing their activities. As a parent, observe your child. Ultimately, you are responsible for him or her. You can help by offering suggestions as needed and guarding against becoming too committed to the activities to notice a change in your child's behavior.

Here are some ideas to try:

- Help your child evaluate activities that are producing a problem. For example, is it a problem with the action itself or something associated with the action, such as a friend who is there?
- If your child has too little free time, help him or her change his or her schedule to make time for relaxation and play.
- Spend time together every day, even if it is only ten or fifteen minutes. This shared time will help you better understand your child's needs and give your child the confidence sometimes needed to tell a parent he or she wants to quit an activity.
- Parents may want to examine their own schedules. Often a parent's hectic schedule will cause a child to be stressed or nervous about the things he or she is doing.
- Discuss the child with his or her pediatrician. Occasionally, when a more serious problem is present, the pediatrician may recommend additional outside help.

Well-meaning parents and adults can sometimes be the source for children being overcommitted at too young an age. Evaluate the situation or activities that are producing a problem and work toward solutions to help your child.

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