



Support
Sesame
Workshop

Home

Search



Site Map

Privacy Policy

123
SESAME STREET PARENTS

Parenting essentials for moms and dads who grew up on Sesame Street.

Search

Support
Sesame
Workshop

Advice Finder

Related Advice

- [Stress & Fears](#)

[Back to Advice Finder](#)

Stress

Our experts explain how children cope with crisis.

by Dr. Charles Flatter, Dr. James M. Herzog, Dr. Phyllis Tyson and Katherine Ross

Children are sensitive to changes in routine, and are often deeply affected when a major life event—a death, a birth, moving to a new home—touches their family. In some cases children may respond with a combination of worry and fear that inhibits their ability to cope. Here, our three experts tell how to recognize the signs of stress and suggest ways to help a child regain his equilibrium.

- [Birth to Two](#)
- [Two to Five](#)
- [Six to Eleven](#)

BIRTH TO TWO

By James M. Herzog, M.D.

A baby can handle almost any kind of stressful condition as long as he can rely on his parents for emotional support and physical comfort. When no one is there to soothe an unhappy baby, however, the child may feel overwhelmed by feelings of insecurity or anxiety. A child is most likely to experience these feelings in the first year of life if his mother withdraws emotionally and can no longer provide the love and attention he relies on.

Babies are so finely attuned to their caregivers' facial expressions and gestures that they can sense when the adult isn't there for them—whether she is actually physically present or not. Let me emphasize that we aren't talking about a parent's short periods of daily inattentiveness, but rather about a state of emotional withdrawal that persists for weeks or even months.

The reasons for this preoccupation can vary—the mother may be desperately worried about a sick relative or about financial or marital problems—but the specific reason isn't important. What matters is that she isn't emotionally available to her child.

How a Baby Reacts to Stress

A child younger than two who is under extreme stress may suffer temporary but dramatic changes in his basic mood or in his reaction to strangers and new situations. A sunny, friendly baby, for example, might become moody and withdrawn. A child who is sensitive and shy may start to act tense. A normally alert baby might become extremely restless. Changes in sleeping or eating habits may also occur. Although all babies have shifts in mood or behavior from time to time, the changes resulting from truly stressful conditions are more intense.

In the second year of life, a child is somewhat less reliant on his mother's constant attention than he was as an infant. He now has a wide range of motor skills at his disposal. The ability to move around as he pleases and to manipulate small objects, as well as a powerful emotional thrust toward independence, make him better able to manage on his own if his mother withdraws.

However, an emotionally needy toddler may try hard to attract his mother's attention, perhaps through risk taking or other provocative behavior (such as climbing and reaching where he knows he should not). Or a child who has been weaned from the bottle or pacifier might resume those old habits, and a child who has been toilet trained might regress.

The Importance of Reassurance

What can parents do to protect their very young child from emotional overload? First they should identify family problems that have the potential to create upheavals for a child. For example, if you or your mate are going through a personal crisis, the initial step is to acknowledge it to yourselves and be ready to support each other through a difficult time. Then you can reassure your baby or toddler that you haven't stopped caring for him. Here's

how:

Be gentle. Although children younger than two may understand only a few words at most, they *can* understand tone of voice and physical touch. Soothing a child physically and verbally is essential to his well-being during the first year of life, when children are most vulnerable.

Explain simply. Starting at about 15 months, a child's increased verbal skill may make it easier for him to understand the causes of his parents' unhappiness and their resulting unavailability. Simple explanations such as, "I'm sad today because your grandmother has fallen and hurt herself," or "We can't have our regular playtime today because your father and I have some important things to talk about," give the child both the information and the reassurance that he craves.

In a very real way, words, tone, and touch can help children to understand that the things they fear the most, rejection and abandonment, have not actually taken place. These solutions are simple, but it has been my experience that they usually work.

Take-Away Tips

- To help a baby through a stressful period, parents should provide lots of soothing physical and vocal contact. These kinds of comfort can help a child understand that he is not being abandoned.
- An emotionally needy toddler may seek attention by becoming more active, even to the point of risk taking. If you're not able to be supervigilant, at least make sure someone else is keeping a close watch on him. —K.R.

TWO TO FIVE

By Charles Flatter, Ed.D.

We normally associate the word *stress* with an event that is unhappy or debilitating: perhaps a death in the family or a financial crisis. And if such a disaster were to strike a family with a preschooler, most parents would know instinctively that their child might need some extra help in dealing with the situation.

But suppose the family were having a new baby or moving to a new house in a better neighborhood. Would most parents think of these events as stressful for their child? Probably not; yet a child might find these kinds of positive changes deeply upsetting, at least at first.

The ordinary, established rhythm of life gives children comfort and confidence. And almost any change that disrupts this rhythm can endanger a child's sense of security. One reason is that preschool children cannot understand the concept of time the way adults do. In particular, younger children in this age group are oriented toward the present, not the future; they are able to see the world only as it is at the moment. And because their reasoning power is not well developed, they cannot imagine that they will ever get *used* to a new sibling or a new preschool. All they know is that the change is painful. Similarly, they don't have much personal history to draw on, and so they cannot take reassurance from any previous experiences with change.

What Parents Can Do

If a child is under stress, the signs may appear in various ways. There may be dramatic transformations in mood (a docile child may become an aggressive one, or vice versa) or in behavior (the child may become clingy, awaken frequently at night, or regress in her bathroom habits). Or she may become agitated by ordinary stimuli, such as loud noises, or become frightened of things, such as shadows, that never seemed scary before.

Almost any parent would want to soothe a child in such a condition, but it may not be easy. In the event of a family tragedy, for example, parents may find it difficult to provide comfort and reassurance at a time when they are feeling overwhelmed themselves. And there's no denying that the sight of a parent weeping or otherwise acting upset can be quite alarming for a child.

Does this mean that parents should try to hide their unhappiness and always put on a brave face when dealing with a crisis? Not at all. But I think parents should do their best to explain to their child (as straightforwardly as they can, given the child's level of understanding) what has occurred. Also, they should make an effort to figure out the child's specific fear and address it. If there's an illness in the family, it's perfectly reasonable to say something like "Your grandmother is sick, and I'm worried that she may not get better," and then add, "But your father and I are in good health and we will always be able to take care of you." Or if you and your spouse are separating, you might explain, "Your father and I are going to live apart for a while," adding, "But this doesn't mean that either of us will love you any less than we do now."

I have always felt that one of the most valuable skills for parents to have is the ability to see the world from their child's viewpoint. Being able to do this not only helps a parent recognize which events may create stress for her child, but also can guide her as to what to say and do to give comfort.

Take-Away Tips

- Try to look at major family events—birth, sickness, or relocation—through your child's eyes. If you understand that something that seems good to adults may be perceived as bad by a child, you'll be better able to deal with any difficulties.
- If your preschooler sees that you are sad or worried, don't deny the truth. Explain the reason for your mood as simply as you can and try to offer the specific reassurance your child needs. —K.R.

SIX TO ELEVEN

By Phyllis Tyson, Ph.D.

In a time when adults seem to be under increasing stress, it's no wonder that we become concerned about stress in our children. Sources of stress for children can come from the external world or from inside themselves. For example, when a child or her family experiences a misfortune, what happens in the *aftermath*, in the child's family or in the child's imagination, may actually be more stressful than the event itself. In a situation where an adult might think that the hardest part is over, a child might feel that things are getting worse.

Consider a case in which a close relative (other than a parent) dies from an illness or in an accident. Although children normally will experience such a loss as intensely painful, they'll probably not be permanently affected by it. In time, they will be able to enjoy their friends and school activities once again, look forward to future events, and eat and sleep regularly.

But now suppose that the child's mother is so distraught by the relative's death that she withdraws emotionally from her child. She may also become more irritable, more demanding, or less tolerant of him. For the child, the mother's behavior will probably have more impact than the event. He will probably try to please his mother; if he fails, he may fall prey to stress and possibly become moody or aggressive. He may lose interest in schoolwork, or experience ongoing changes in eating or sleeping habits.

When It's Mostly in the Mind

A parent's emotional absence is not the only possible cause of a child's feelings of stress. Sometimes—even though the parent hasn't withdrawn—a family crisis can inspire serious doubts and fears in a child. Let's say, for example, that a wife and husband decide to divorce. In most cases, children will learn to adjust as long as both parents make a determined effort to keep the children's needs in mind. However, it can happen that a child feels personally responsible for the breakup. "If I'd been a better daughter," an eight-year-old may tell herself, "Mom and Dad might have stayed together."

If the divorcing parents were able to become aware of their daughter's anguish, they might help her to cope. Unfortunately, because situations like divorce or death are difficult for parents to bear, the child's needs don't always get the proper attention.

Similarly, parents may be unaware if their child is troubled by an event that adults would consider to be happy. For example, a newborn baby's arrival may lead a school-age child to fantasize that she is being replaced in her parents' affections because she somehow failed to please them. Her need to please and her yearning for reassurance are likely to be very stressful for her.

Despite every good intention, parents cannot completely protect their children against stress. It is critical that parents learn to recognize when an event puts stress on their child and be able to give specific comfort, whether by answering questions, telling children that they are loved, or providing lots of attention and affection.

When parents are sensitive in this way, their children become less vulnerable to stress, even in the most difficult circumstances. They are able to recapture the sense that the world is, at least in some ways, a secure and predictable place.

Take-Away Tips

- A family crisis or tragedy may cause a child to experience disturbing doubts and fantasies. If your child seems troubled, open a discussion with her. Let her do most of the talking and acknowledge her feelings. Listening to her and answering her questions will give her the kind of reassurance she needs.
- If a mother is so distraught by an event that she withdraws emotionally from a child, this may seem worse to the child than the misfortune itself. His behavior may then become childish or aggressive; be aware that his moodiness may result from stress. —K.R.

Consultant Dr. Charles Flatter is a professor of human development at the University of Maryland at College Park Institute for Child Study.

Dr. James M. Herzog is senior scholar in child psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a practicing child and adult psychiatrist.

Consultant Dr. Phyllis Tyson is an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Diego.

Katherine Ross is a freelance book and magazine editor based in New York City.

E-mail this URL to a friend
Printer-friendly version

[Copyright](#) 1998-2007 Sesame Workshop. [Terms of Use](#).