

# Kids Have Stress Too!®

Ideas, Tips and Strategies for  
Parents of Preschoolers





## **Kids Have Stress Too!**<sup>®</sup> Ideas, Tips and Strategies for Parents of Preschoolers

This booklet provides an introduction to some of the key concepts of **Kids Have Stress Too!**<sup>®</sup>, a program designed to help parents, caregivers and educators become more aware of children's stress, and to help children cope with and develop effective ways of dealing with stress. We'll also provide some examples of activities and strategies that you can use to help children manage day-to-day struggles and stress, and ease the transition from home to child care and back home again.

## What is stress?

Stress is a normal, everyday occurrence. It's our body's response to feeling afraid, overworked, overstimulated, threatened or excited. We tend to think of stress as a bad thing, but a certain amount of it actually helps us feel alert, energized and interested in life. However, too much stress, particularly when we don't have any control over it, can make people unhappy and can interfere with their ability to respond to everyday tasks and challenges. Stress can also lead to health problems.

Even very young children experience stress, and it's important for adults to recognize and help preschoolers deal with it. High levels of unrelieved stress can lead to behaviour problems and can interfere with a child's ability to function normally. When we help children deal with stress, they begin to build coping skills they will need throughout life.

Preschool stress comes in two main forms: everyday stress and long-term or chronic stress.



## Everyday stress

Children can experience stress at home, in child care settings, or even in play with others. In the course of an average day, preschool children experience stress when they have to wait, when they want something they can't have, or when they lose or break one of their toys.

Other common sources of preschool stress include:

- early or rushed mornings, being hurried
- exposure to new situations
- too many expectations or demands
- separation from parents
- difficulties with peer friendships
- fights or disagreements with siblings
- transitioning from one activity or place to another
- new beginnings such as starting kindergarten or child care
- frequent change of caregivers.

These experiences can be stressful, but they are also normal, preschool versions of the sorts of stressors children will face as adults. Learning how to deal with them – with our help – is the first step in developing coping skills.

A high level of unrelieved stress can lead to behaviour problems. It can interfere with a child's ability to learn and to get along well with others, and can cause illness due to a weakened immune system.

## Long-term or chronic stress

Long-term stressors are unhappy or difficult experiences that can affect people for a long time, including:

- serious ongoing conflict between family members
- divorce or separation
- a serious illness or health condition
- death of a loved one
- frequent moves
- being bullied or harassed over time
- dealing with unrealistic expectations and demands (one's own or from others).

Parents have two main responsibilities with respect to preschool stress: helping children cope with normal levels of stress, and protecting them and helping them recover from stress that is too much to cope with.



## Stress or anxiety?

Stress in children is usually a response to one or more external events, like the stressors we mentioned earlier. Anxiety, on the other hand, is when kids become unreasonably fearful of situations which objectively aren't dangerous, or as dangerous as they imagine them to be. Their anxiety is an extreme response to situations that they might face every day, like phobias (e.g., fear of the dark, fear of dogs), fear of being separated from their parents, uncontrollable worries (e.g., about their safety or about being in trouble at school), or being in social situations. Anxiety really becomes a problem for children when it starts to interfere in their lives (and the lives of those around them), which can then cause them to experience more stress. Seek professional help if:

- anxiety is significantly interfering in your child's life, stopping them from doing the things that are important
- your child is constantly seeking abnormal amounts of reassurance
- your child is showing symptoms of stress and is clearly not coping well
- as a parent, you would like to discuss parenting strategies and ways of increasing your child's resilience.



## Helping children with “normal” stress

Although we can begin to teach and model healthy coping strategies with preschoolers, the fact is, they can't cope with stress on their own very well. Parents have the ability to help their children deal with day-to-day stress using simple tools every day. It starts with three basics: helping children feel connected to parents and other caregivers, providing a stable and happy home environment, and comforting children when they are overloaded with stress.

**Connection:** When preschoolers have secure relationships with their parents, they know that someone will be there to help them deal with their problems. Strong relationships also help children to trust and listen to the adult who is supporting them.

**Home environment:** Preschoolers can handle stress better when they have a healthy, balanced lifestyle with good food, lots of time for physical activity, play and relaxation, and daily routines that make their world feel predictable and safe.

**Comfort:** In order for children to learn to comfort themselves, they first must know what it is like to be comforted. And honestly, one of the best stress-relieving tools you have is your body. Regardless of anything else you might say or do to help a stressed preschooler, the comfort of physical contact is one of the best stress relievers there is. In fact, research has shown that the positive brain stimulation children get from being touched in early childhood helps build the brain's pathways that help people cope with stress.



## What are the signs that a preschooler may be overstressed?

When children feel stressed, it usually comes out in their behaviour.

For example, in toddlers and preschoolers, a tantrum is one common kind of stress response, often due to a combination of stressors, such as being tired, hungry or bored and then having two or three frustrating things happen one after another.

Other possible signs of too much stress include:

- recurring headaches, tummy aches or neck pain
- increased irritability, sadness, panic, anger, anxiety
- intensification of nervous habits like nail biting, hair twisting, thumb sucking
- a pattern of overreacting to minor problems, e.g., yelling, crying, shutting down
- trouble eating, relaxing or sleeping
- unusual sleep patterns or nightmares
- increased dependency or clinginess
- unusually low energy, or the opposite, very high levels of energy or restlessness
- going back to less mature behaviour
- increased behaviour problems, such as biting, kicking, poor listening, acting out, impulsiveness
- increased whining, crying, fighting
- becoming withdrawn or listless.



## Dealing with stress

It's not always easy to tell when preschoolers are feeling stressed out, so you need to make an effort to understand what bothers and upsets your child. Don't wait until you think your child is stressed to start thinking about it. When things are calm, encourage your child to describe his worries or fears. Listen very carefully and try not to interrupt or finish his sentences. Take his worries or fears seriously, even if they seem silly.

Help children find ways to reduce the feelings of stress by getting them involved in activities they enjoy such as playing with favourite toys, reading a book, cuddling with a stuffed animal or stomping on a rug. Even very young children can start to learn relaxation and stress-reducing techniques such as deep breathing. One way to encourage deep breathing in preschoolers is to get them to breathe in through their nose and slowly out through their mouth. Ask them to pretend they are blowing up a balloon inside their tummy and then blow the air out through their mouth. Do this with them. You can also do this yourself to calm down in stressful moments. Your children will learn by watching you.

Another fun way to encourage deep breathing is by blowing bubbles. This activity has been used in hospitals to help children cope with stressful illnesses and treatments.

No technique will work all of the time. But if something is bothering your child and you're not sure what it is, it never hurts to go back to the basics. Pay a little extra attention to her needs. Spend extra time together and watch her more closely than usual. Offer some extra physical contact by doing things like taking her hand as you walk along the sidewalk, or pulling her up against you as you watch TV together. If your child doesn't want the extra contact, she will let you know.

Be sure to support children when they seem stressed. Tell them when you notice that they seem upset. Ask them how their bodies feel (tummy, tense muscles, etc.). Explain to them that there is a connection between the way our bodies feel and emotions such as worry, sadness and anger.

## Stress management in good times



Even when your children are not showing signs of stress, it is still a good idea to encourage everyday activities that help them feel good about themselves and show them ways to manage and reduce the impact of stress.

- Make sure preschoolers have plenty of unstructured play time. Play really helps young children let go of some of their stress. For children 3 and under, water play can be particularly soothing. Who says baths always have to be about getting clean?
- Children require 10-12 hours of sleep every night to feel their best. Establish a regular bedtime routine with quiet, calming activities such as music, reading or quiet play for half an hour before bedtime.
- Vigorous physical activity is another great stress reliever for young children and key to their overall health and well-being. Experts advise that children aged 1-5 years should participate in at least two hours of physical activity every day. Read more at [www.activehealthykids.ca](http://www.activehealthykids.ca)
- Limit TV, computer and video game time and encourage your kids to be active. Be active with them. Go for walks, go to the park, or put on some music for a family dance party.
- Allow your children opportunities to make small choices that are appropriate for their age: "Do you want to wear your red shirt or your green shirt today?" This helps them feel a sense of control in their life. Research shows that when people feel they have control over a situation, they respond better to stress.
- Show your children that you love them with words, hugs, kisses. Play and laugh together.

Model effective stress-management strategies. When you're feeling rushed or stressed, stop yourself and say, "Wow, I'm feeling stressed. I'm going to take a few deep breaths to help me calm down." If children see parents using stress-reduction tools in tense moments, they will learn by example.

## Can some stress be avoided?

It's possible to prevent or avoid some sources of stress in preschool children, usually by avoiding situations that are not ideal for young children, or setting up situations to be more child-friendly.

For example, preschoolers don't always cope well with long shopping trips. But if a trip is kept short (maybe you can do some parts of it later, without your child) or if you schedule a break that includes a child-friendly activity, the trip will be less stressful for your child. Pack a snack and a drink to avoid meltdowns from hunger.

Another example: Some children are more sensitive than others and more easily overwhelmed by exciting or stimulating situations. These sensitive children may have a better time if their birthday party is kept short with a few simple activities and three or four guests, rather than a house full of children and lots of noisy games. Also, try to keep daily routines simple, regular and predictable.

If you are dealing with an unavoidable stressful situation, like starting kindergarten or a new child care centre, do what you can to minimize stress in other parts of your child's life. This may not be the time to try to get him to eat unfamiliar foods or learn to put himself to bed on his own. Likewise, it might not be the best time for you to take on a new volunteer commitment or go on a weekend getaway without him.



## Talking about feelings

As much as we might like to, we can't prevent kids from feeling frustrated, angry or sad at times. And that's okay. Children need to experience these normal human emotions so they can learn how to manage them.

An important part of that is learning how to talk about feelings. Children who can recognize, identify and talk about emotions are less likely to reach the point where they act out their strong emotions with disruptive behaviours. Research has actually shown that when people talk about feelings, the thinking part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) is stimulated and the "acting out" part of the brain (the amygdala) becomes less active.

The first step is for children to hear us talking about emotions. Label your own feelings. "It's really frustrating when I can't find my car keys." If your child seems angry or frustrated, point it out to him and use words to help him learn to identify the emotions. "I wonder if you might still feel angry about what happened at the playground," or "I guess you felt mad when they wouldn't let you in the game." These little conversations help children learn to recognize and name their own emotional states. Gradually, they will learn to express their feelings in words rather than just acting them out.

Talking to children about their emotions also shows that you understand and care about how they feel. Being understood and listened to helps kids feel connected to parents, and that in itself can alleviate a lot of stress. In short, helping children build these skills contributes to their emotional well-being, both now and for the future.

But don't forget that it takes a long time for children to develop emotional control. Preschoolers can't always talk about their emotions, or even identify them, so talking about feelings is not always a quick fix for preschool stress. Keep the conversation short, comfort your child and then, when she is ready, help her to get her mind off being upset with a new activity.





## Stop, look and listen !

It's important to know what bothers and upsets your child. One of the techniques from the **Kids Have Stress Too!**® program is called **Stop, Look and Listen!** It is designed to help parents tune in to their children's stress.

### Stop

- **Set the climate.** You might say, "I know there are things that upset you sometimes. Can you tell me about them?" Give the child time to finish what he is saying. Listen both to his words and the feeling in his words.
- **Choose the moment.** What times do you find your child wants to open up and talk to you? Any quiet time during the day or at bedtime might work. Find a time when you are relaxed and not feeling rushed and can be together without interruption.
- **Find "little" opportunities to connect.** Some parents find that the best time to talk to kids is when they are doing some everyday activity together, such as riding the bus, washing dishes or folding laundry.

### Look

- **Once a day, check your child's face and body.** Are you able to make eye contact? Does she appear relaxed or tense? Are her eyes calm or darting back and forth? Is there tension in her body?
- **Pay close attention** to her facial expressions, mood, body language and activity level. This can help you gain a sense of your child's well-being and notice signs of stress.

### Listen

- **Give him your full attention.** Show that you are really interested in your child and what he is saying by facing him and making eye contact. Try saying things like, "We all feel worried or scared sometimes and it's good to talk about those feelings."
- **Listen without speaking.** Nod your head and give other nonverbal signs that you are interested in what he is saying. It can take a preschooler a long time to put the words together, particularly when he is trying to express something difficult, confusing or upsetting. Don't finish his sentences, even if you think you know what he is trying to say. Give him time to put it into his own words.

## Just be there

- **Sometimes children don't feel like talking about what's bothering them.** Try to respect that, give them space, but still show them that you'll be there when they do feel like talking. Even when children don't feel like talking, they often don't want parents to leave them alone. Sometimes we can help children feel better just by keeping them company. Whether they need to talk or just be in the same room with you – make yourself available.
- **Do something fun together.** If you notice that your son or daughter seems down in the dumps, stressed or having a bad day – but doesn't feel like talking – initiate something you can do together. Read a book, go for a walk, watch a movie, or bake some cookies. This teaches children that there are ways people can take care of themselves and cheer themselves up. Children will also appreciate the chance to spend special time with you.
- **Give children time and space to unwind.** Sometimes children need time on their own with quiet activities such as blocks, play dough or imaginative play.



## Reducing child care stress

These days, most young children spend their daytime hours with caregivers other than their parents in home or group child care settings. Research shows that high quality, nurturing child care environments can support healthy social and emotional development in young children. Still, the child care experience comes with certain challenges for both parents and children, including getting used to new routines, new relationships with peers and caregivers, and separation from parents.

### Working with your child care provider

You and your child care provider(s) can form a partnership that helps ensure the best possible child care experience for your family. Share any information about your child that will help your provider do a better job and ask her to do the same for you. Check in with your provider regularly to find out how your child is doing in child care. Find out if the staff has special routines or schedules for checking in with parents.

### Changes in behaviour or routine

If you have noticed changes in your child's behaviour at home (sleeping, eating, aggressiveness, relationships with other family members, physical acting out), share this information with your child care provider. The caregiver may have noticed changes as well, and you can work together to resolve any problems.

### Memories of home

When starting child care, it may help to bring photographs from home to the child care centre – pictures of the family, pets, your home or even your child's room. The photos can be shared with staff and other children and your child will feel like he is bringing a little bit of home to child care to show to others. Security objects from home, such as a cuddly toy, favourite book or "blankie" can also be comforting to a stressed child. Ask your child care provider to let your child have the security object when he is upset.

### Spend time

Plan a visit from time to time to the child's caregiver to either assist with an activity, each lunch with the class, or help supervise on a special outing. It will be a special treat for your child and will also help you stay in touch with how she spends her days.

### Be positive and consistent

A positive and consistent approach to discipline at home and child care is an important part of helping your child adjust to the child care environment. Talk with care providers about how you deal with particular behaviours and situations at home and find out how they are handled at child care. Remember, consistency is not the same as rigidity. Children can learn to adapt to different caregivers.

Consider incorporating some of the songs, tools and techniques that child care providers use into your home life with your child. Ask your provider about the **Kids Have Stress Too!**® Toolbox Activities that they have been using and how you can use them at home.

## Transition times

**Remember that feeling rushed puts pressure on children.** Look for ways to make your mornings less rushed. Try getting up a half an hour earlier. Get clothes, lunches and backpacks ready the night before. Talk to your child about the day ahead – that she is going to preschool and you are going to work. Remind her that she will spend the day with her friends and that you will see her again at the end of the day.

**Drop-off or pick-up time** can be an opportunity to have a brief chat with the caregiver about how your child is doing, for example to explain that your child had a difficult morning or slept poorly the night before. At the end of the day, find out how her day went. If one parent is responsible for dropping off and picking up the child, the other parent should occasionally do so in order to get to know the caregiver. Make sure your child knows in advance who will be picking her up.

**Make time to tune in, connect and cuddle.** Try to spend the first few minutes after you return home giving your child undivided attention. Some children would love to be held or rocked for a few minutes to reconnect. Other children might just want to be near you, doing quiet things, but able to have your attention before you get involved in chores.

**Don't be surprised** if your child falls apart shortly after you pick him up from child care. This is normal. Children often save up their strong feelings all day and let them out when they get home.



## Different kids Different experiences of stress

Some children experience more stress than others, some are more sensitive to stress and some are better at handling it than others.

The big challenge is to know our children, pay attention to their stress and try to ease it when possible using the tools outlined in this booklet. That's the best way to reduce the chances that higher than normal levels of stress will start to interfere with their behaviour and day-to-day functioning. It will also give them the best chance to grow up happy and healthy.

Please remember one thing. We cannot eliminate all stress from children's lives, nor can we always succeed in making stressed children feel better immediately. Stress is a part of life, and children learn how to handle child-sized stress by dealing with it, with appropriate help and support. By practicing stress-reduction and relaxation strategies with your children, you're helping them build skills they will use throughout their lives.



## For more information:

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, Parents Matter website  
[www.parentsmatter.ca](http://www.parentsmatter.ca)

The Centre of Knowledge on Healthy Child Development  
[www.knowledge.offordcentre.com](http://www.knowledge.offordcentre.com)

Centre of Excellence for Early Child Development  
[www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca](http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca)

The Canadian Pediatric Society  
[www.caringforkids.cps.ca](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca)

The Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation – When Something’s Wrong: Ideas for Families  
[www.cprf.ca/education/families.html](http://www.cprf.ca/education/families.html)

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Special thanks to The Lawson Foundation and TD Bank Financial Group for their ongoing support of the KHST!<sup>®</sup> Program.

**Kids Have Stress Too!**<sup>®</sup> is a program of the Psychology Foundation of Canada designed to help parents, caregivers and educators become more aware of children’s stress, and to help children develop effective ways of dealing with stress. It is used in many preschool and school settings to help alleviate stress and encourage positive social and emotional development. Please see our website at [www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org) for more information.

The mission of the Psychology Foundation of Canada is to share sound psychological knowledge to better people’s lives. Please visit the website at [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org) for more information about our activities.





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