

June 2011 Edition

Vacations are on their way

For most people, summer is a time for vacations and this represents the sensation of freedom. However, for many children this is a time of transition. Change is often accompanied by stress. It involves the crazy rush of everyday life and newness: summer camp, new day care, loss of friends, change of educator, loss of certain relationships, pressure to perform, academic failure, summer courses, moving to a different home, new social group, new members of the family or the arrival of a new half brother or sister, fatigue of parents and the need for vacations... Ouf!

All of these different sources of stress result in different symptoms, which may be more or less obvious depending on our attention to them. As a parent, it is important to keep in mind that children sometimes have difficulty expressing themselves with words and may react to stress in a variety of ways. For example:

- On a physical level: constipation or diarrhea, head or stomach aches, nervous tics, skin problems (redness, irritation, eczema...), increase or decrease in the amount of sleep, pains, nightmares, frequent accidents...
- On a behavioural level: stuttering, fidgeting, crying, aggressiveness, irritability, tantrums, constant demands, excessive crying...

These symptoms are not solely linked to stress but they may be accentuated by it.

In our current fast-paced society more and more children are brought before psychologists due to the development of anxiety disorders. It is therefore important to learn how to cope with stress without it affecting our physical and psychological wellbeing.

How can we help children?

There are many ways to counter the negative effects of stress. However, we must first learn to recognize it and accept it.

We must learn to detect and decode the signs of stress expressed by children (as well as adults) and accept that the child, through words and behaviours, says to his or her parents: "We are experiencing stress so let's find a way to cope with it together." Here is a list of some favourable attitudes to adhere to:

Favourable Attitudes

- Limit the sources of stress or changes that occur simultaneously. For example: Moving homes yet keeping the same day care center or same friends at a summer camp.
- Name the worries, changes and new events that are to come as a way of preparing the child for the occurrence of these events.
- Offer choices within the limits established by the parents so that the child retains certain control over his or her daily life.
- Give free time: Children need time to play, to dream, to use their imagination and even to waste time (which is something adults have the tendency to forget!).
- Be present: For example, in the evening, ask the child what he or she enjoyed most about his or her day as well as what he or she didn't enjoy. This gives the child the opportunity to verbalise and name the stressors as well as distinguish the positive aspects.
- Protect the child from markedly intense emotions: excessive noise, non-constructive conflicts, playing video games or watching television for too long periods of time...
- Establish priorities with the child.
- Determine what the stress factors are and try to decrease them or eliminate them.
- Do physical exercise as well as relaxation exercises.
- Let the child invent games that allow for self-expression and as an adult participate in these games.
- Introduce games in routine activities since children use play to discover

their world and environment. For example: Sing or play music while making the bed or while doing other household chores.

- Have fun: Laughter is fundamental for mental health. Don't hesitate to be silly to relieve a tense atmosphere, run outside with the kids, play dress up...

In Conclusion

There exists as many ways to deal with stress as there are people on earth. What's important is to find your own solutions within your particular context while considering the child and encouraging his or her participation. Keep in mind that having fun and playing is fundamental for a balanced human being.

Finally, don't hesitate to communicate with your employee assistance program (EAP). A professional can help you find strategies specially adapted to your personal and family situation.

Have a great summer and pleasant vacations!

*Nathalie Parent, psychologist
Your Employee Assistance Program Team
Les Consultants Longpré & Associés*

Psychologist in a private office since 1999, Mrs Parent is also a lecturer at Laval University, gives conferences and professional training. Her specialties include anything concerning relationships (work, couple, family), the domain of children and families as well as psychosomatics. She has also written books, texts and articles in partnership with different collaborators.