



# Stress Summary

---

## Why Stress?

Young children and adults alike experience stress. Feelings of stress are naturally built-in mechanisms for human survival and thriving. These feelings are the body's way of warning you when there is danger and calling your attention to problems that need resolving. Children at age two are learning about their strong feelings every day and you, as a parent or someone in a parenting role, can help your child learn to identify and manage their stress -- an important skill they will use throughout their lives.

## Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- *"I noticed your eyes got wide and you came running over. Are you feeling stressed?"*
- *"I noticed that you stayed right beside me instead of going to play with your friends at the new park. I wonder if you are feeling overwhelmed by the new place to play?"*
- *"I know it is almost snack time. I wonder if you are feeling hungry?"*
- *"How did you feel when we went to the new playground this morning?"*

Discuss challenges. In Step 2, plan to teach what they can do instead.

**Trap** Be sure you talk about stress at a calm time when you are not stressed!

## Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

Learn together! Stress can be such an integral experience in people's daily lives, you may not realize how it can influence every aspect of your day.

- Model behaviors (and your children will notice and learn!).
- Get exercise and fresh air.
- Remember to breathe.
- Talk about feelings regularly.
- Create quiet time.
- Set a goal for daily connection.
- Notice, name, and accept feelings regularly.
- Brainstorm coping strategies for yourself such as imagine a favorite place, take a walk, get a drink of water, take deep breaths, count to 50, draw, color, or build something.
- Create a calm down space.

- Work on your child's feelings vocabulary.
- Share ideas on what can help them feel better.
- Create a family gratitude ritual.

**Tip** Deep breathing actually removes the chemical that has flowed over your brain so that you regain access to your creativity, language, and logic versus staying stuck in your primal brain. Practicing deep breathing with your child can offer them a powerful tool to use anytime, anywhere when they feel overcome with heated emotions.

**Tip** Play feelings guessing games with the family. At a meal, share facial expressions showing a range of emotions and guess which they are.

**Trap** Though at times it can feel like it, there are no "bad" emotions. Every feeling is a vital message from ourselves. Because feelings are an instant interpretation, we always have the opportunity to reinterpret our response.

### Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills, Confidence, and Develop Habits

- Use "Show me..." statements like: *"Show me how you hug your pillow in your safe base to calm your body."*
- Accept feelings.
- Recognize effort: *"I notice how you took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. That's excellent!"*
- Practice deep breathing.

**Tip** Include reflections on the day in your bedtime routine. You might ask, *"What did you like about today?"* or *"What were you most proud of?"* or *"What are you looking forward to tomorrow?"* You should answer the questions as well. Children may not have the chance to reflect on what's good and abundant in their lives throughout the day. Grateful thoughts are a central contributor to happiness and wellbeing.

**Trap** Don't move on or nag when children are stressed or upset. Children often need more time to calm down, regain perspective, and move on. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they can take steps to self-manage. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they are able to do what you need them to do.

### Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills: *"You seem stressed. Are you feeling worried? What can we do to help you feel better?"*
- Learn about development. Becoming informed about your child's developmental milestones will offer you empathy and patience.

- Reflect on outcomes. *“That playdate with our friends was fun and not scary after all. What did you think?”*
- Stay engaged. Try out new and different coping strategies to see what works best.

## Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Notice even small successes: *“When you couldn’t get your coat zipped, you took a deep breath and then asked for help. Way to keep your calm!”*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. *“Let’s do the steps of our bedtime routine, and then we can snuggle up to a good book and talk about our day.”*

**Tip** Be specific. “Good job” seems not to carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior -- *“You took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. Love seeing that!”* -- can promote more of the same.

**Trap** If you focus only on outcomes -- *“You didn’t get upset today”* -- you miss the chance to influence the process. Better to say -- *“I noticed when you got frustrated you took a break. That’s showing what a big kid you are, dealing with your big feelings.”*

**Trap** Avoid bribes. A bribe is a promise for a behavior, while praise is special attention after the behavior. While bribes may work in the short term, praise grows lasting motivation for good behavior and effort. For example, instead of saying *“If you don’t cry and whine, you’ll get to play longer outside today”* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *“You were such a big helper in the store today. I really appreciate that!”*

**Celebrate yourself** for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your child’s success today and in their future!

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2021). *Stress Summary. Age 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.



Brought to you by the Offices of Child Care, SAMHSA, and DPHHS. The views and opinions contained in the publication do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and should not be construed as such.