



# Stress and Anxiety Summary

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## 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 ages three and four 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.

**Tip** Even though signs of stress and anxiety may look the same, they are different and require different approaches to handle each. While mild anxiety may respond well to coping strategies used to manage stress, a child experiencing anxiety may require additional help from a mental health professional to determine if they have an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are different from feelings of stress or mild anxiety, which are short term.

## 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?"*
- *"Your sister cried when you took the toy. What do you think she is feeling?"*
- *"When your friend didn't get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?"*
- *"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.

- 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.
- Design a plan for those times when stress takes over so you don't have to think in those moments. What will you do or say? Where will you go?
- Create a calm down space.
- Work on your child's feelings vocabulary.
- Teach your child how to stop rumination.
- 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 can take some deep breaths to calm down."*
- Accept feelings.
- Recognize effort: *"I notice how you took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. That's excellent!"*
- Practice deep breathing.

**Tip** After a tough day, your child may be internally beating themselves up for what they did and said earlier. So, end the day with love. They need to hear that you love them NO MATTER WHAT on those days in particular.

**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 you do to help yourself 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. Include hugs as a way to appreciate one another.

**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 argue with your sister, you'll get extra game time"* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *"You were helpful 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!

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