



# Stress and Anxiety Summary

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## Why Stress?

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 ages 5-10 are in the process of learning about their strong feelings, 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**

- *"When do you feel stressed?"*
- *"When do you feel uncomfortable, frustrated, or angry?"* (These feelings can occur to mask underlying stress.)
- *"What time of day?"*
- *"What people, places, and activities are usually involved?"*

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 family feelings vocabulary. Use specific feelings words to describe your state of mind and help your child describe theirs.
- Teach your child how to stop repetitively analyzing problems or concerns.
- 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 use your safe base to calm down."*
- Practice your plan for managing stressful situations.
- Recognize effort: *"I notice how you took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. That's excellent!"*
- Proactively remind: *"Remember what we are going to say when we keep playing worries over and again in our mind? What is it?"*

**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 have a test coming up today. Do you remember what you can do to help yourself if you feel stressed?"*
- Learn about development. Becoming informed about your child's developmental milestones will offer you empathy and patience.
- Reflect on outcomes. *"Seems like you couldn't get to sleep last night because you had so much on your mind. Did you have a hard time paying attention in class? What could we do tonight to help?"*
- 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: *"I noticed how you took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. That's excellent!"*
- 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 with your homework, you moved away and took some deep breaths. Yes! Excellent."*

**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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