



**NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S**  
*When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.™*

**Helping Hand™**

*Health Education for Patients and Families*

## Helping Children Feel Safe in Stressful Times

Every child will have stress in their life. Some experience more stress than others, and too much can be unhealthy. A stay in the hospital, new diagnosis, major change in the family, and separation from family and peers can all be very stressful for children. A child's age and maturity affect how they view and responds to stress. We can also teach children ways to better manage stress in their lives. If you understand how your child feels and copes with stress, you will be better able to help them deal with the stress.

### What children think and fear at certain ages

Things that are stressful for children may not be the same as things that are stressful for adults. Children, at most ages, worry about separation from their parents or friends. While children develop at different rates, there are common concerns at certain ages:

<u>Pre-school</u> (3 to 5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not fully able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Fear of a tragedy may be same as fear of monsters under the bed.</li><li>• May feel guilty when bad things happen. Worry that they did something to cause a bad situation.</li><li>• Very perceptive. Pick up on parents' fears and anxieties without anyone having to say a word.</li></ul>
<u>School-age</u> (6 to 11 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Concerned about their own safety and security and that of their family and friends.</li><li>• Fears can cause emotional problems. Children understand the reality of a situation, but not the reasons for violence, death or other tragedy.</li></ul>
<u>Adolescents/Teens</u> (12 to 18 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Likely to understand many facts but have trouble accepting the disruption the event causes in their lives.</li><li>• Have trouble seeing the long-term impact of their choices and experiences</li></ul>

## Signs of stress

During and after stressful events, children and teens may have a wide range of feelings and behavior changes. Here are some of the behaviors you might see during stressful times:

- Depressed mood, sadness
- Angry, demanding
- Changes in appetite – eats more or less than usual
- Restless, fidgety, hyperactive
- Trouble sleeping
- Regression (like bedwetting for a child who is potty trained or a return to thumb-sucking)
- Whiny, clingy with caregivers
- Emotional outbursts
- Physical symptoms, like abdominal pain, chest pain or headaches

## How to talk to children about stressors

- Be honest, calm and factual. Answer children's questions, but do not overload them with too much information.
- Offer hope but be realistic.
- Assure children you are there to help them.
- Help children and teens to express their worries and fears.
  - Younger children may share their feelings in play and drawings.
  - Older children may want to write about their feelings or use art and music.
  - Toddlers and preschoolers may feel guilty when bad things happen. Reassure them that they did not cause what happened.

## Family

- Encourage family members to pay special attention to one another. Children of all ages need extra hugs or attention in stressful times.
- Some children may not benefit from bedside, family-centered rounds. They may not understand the medical terms. Caregivers can meet with medical providers just outside the door if needed.
- Try to keep children informed about important events based on their developmental level. Talk with health care providers about how to share information with them.
- To help children and teens manage stress and tension, encourage physical exercise, play and other activities that help them relax and unwind. Ask about the Child Life resources in the hospital and the teen room for teenagers.

- Continue with your family's daily routines and schedules as much as you can. Daily structure and a familiar routine help children feel a sense of safety and comfort.
- Help children in the hospital by bringing familiar, comforting things from home. Discuss your normal routines with health care team members so they can better support your family-centered care needs.

## **Too much stress**

Children who live with stress all the time may show ongoing signs of emotional and physical problems if their stress level gets too high. Please talk with a member of your child's health care team if you see behavior changes that:

- last longer than a few weeks,
- keep children from taking part in their usual activities
- continue to get worse.

Children of all ages need the support of their loved ones during times of increased stress. It is important that caregivers take care of themselves as well. Be sure you take time to rest, recuperate, eat and participate in enjoyable activities.

Social connections are also very important. Keep in touch with people who can give you support. This may be listening, giving advice or helping with tasks that need to be done. If in the hospital, caregivers can take a break in the Blue Jackets Family Resource Center. Take advantage of the chance to enjoy some down time.