



by Karen Stephens

# Counseling: When to Seek Professional Help for Children Experiencing Stress

Age-appropriate stress during childhood, and learning how to manage it, is a normal part of growing up. After all, ordinary demands of living guarantee some level of stress. Typical stresses tend to center around basic developmental issues that help ensure children's survival.

For instance, we all start life feeling uneasy about separation from our parents. Let's face it; that's a wise thing to be concerned about if you want to live beyond infancy. The worry isn't irrational; it's something each of us has to come to terms with during childhood.

Whether children do — or don't — manage abandonment issues to create a sense of safety and security determines when they can devote energy to facing other developmental challenges, such as independently exploring the world beyond mom, dad, and home.

As every parent has witnessed, children's stress isn't limited to separation anxiety and fear of abandonment. To some extent, all children eventually confront and cope with stress-inducing fears related to:

- loss of love, approval, and being forgotten
- failure and criticism from not meeting others' expectations
- injury, harm, or even death from real or imagined dangers, from monsters and animals to car accidents to medical procedures
- changes in life that are "unknown" or "unpredictable" (such as sibling birth, starting child care, parent divorce, move to a new home, or a parent's drug dependence
- embarrassment or humiliation (especially for kids older than age 2 years).

Children who experience sensitive, reliable care that is responsive to their individual make-up and personality most often overcome fears, worries, and anxiety. People often call it kids' "outgrowing" fears, but it involves more than just maturation. And there's even more than parenting style that affects children's responses to stress.

A child's unique temperament influences his or her coping ability. Children of "difficult" or "slow-to-warm-up" temperament require more time and coaching as they learn stress management. In addition, research tells us that managing stress can be a bit more challenging for boys than girls. But those parents with sons take heart; eventually all children can learn to cope appropriately with stress.

Parents can help children manage stress. However, if a child's stress becomes so debilitating that it undermines the child's ability to be happy and cope with daily life, it could be time to turn to professional mental health services.

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To determine if a mental health professional could help your child, reflect on the following. Honest and objective answers will help you make an informed decision that could make a world of difference to your child's life.

- **Are your child's worries or behaviors typical for his/her age or stage of development?** Observe your child's behavior objectively. Behavior can be a "cry for help", a signal children give when they need emotional support. If you need help knowing what is or isn't "typical", refer to child development books, pediatricians, or experienced parents whose judgment you trust. Well-educated and experienced child care and early education professionals are excellent resources for identifying typical and atypical behavior.

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- **Is there a logical cause for the worry or behavior?** Could recent events have triggered the behavior? Has the family moved recently? Has there been a death, divorce, or separation? Has a neighbor or classmate experienced trauma? Have catastrophes been prominent in the news?
- **How frequently does your child express stress or engage in stress-related behavior?** Occasionally, frequently, several times a day, weekly, constantly? Is your child chronically irritable, cranky, jumpy, or tense?
- **Does your child engage in stress-related "coping" behaviors, such as nail biting, thumb-sucking, hair or eyelash pulling?** Does she show a strong, moderate, or slight interest in the behavior? Does he engage in the behavior compulsively or only occasionally when bored? Is the behavior her only coping mechanism when enduring stressful feelings such as anger, anxiety, or fear?
- **Does your child's emotional state or behavior negatively affect his/her life?** Is the child embarrassed, humiliated, or scared by the behavior? Has he asked for help in coping? Does the behavior cause teasing or rejection by peers or siblings? Has it interfered with school or child care?
- **Is basic health and well-being affected?** Does your child sleep more or less than usual? Eat more or less? Have self-help skills regressed, i.e., toileting or dressing?
- **Is your child talking about fears or using behavior to manipulate you?** Is it a way of getting more attention? Is she asking for reassurance? Does she manipulate you to control everything possible?
- **How long has the worry or behavior persisted?** Has it lasted a week or a month? Does it occur during a particular activity? Does it occur with particular people? Does it occur at a particular time of day? Does it resist change despite all the efforts you've made to reduce stress?

If you answer many of the questions above with "yes", be a wise parent and seek the professional mental health counseling services that can make your child's life, and yours, calmer and more stable.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.