

Understanding Stress

Through Start Smart Stay Safe (S4), your child has been learning about how changes in our lives can make us feel sad, angry, upset, unsure/confused, or afraid. By paying attention to the way our bodies respond when we experience these emotions, children discover that there are strategies we can learn and develop to manage this stress.

What does Stress Feel Like?

When we experience stress, often we can feel it in our bodies. This is called the “stress response”. These sensations help our bodies prepare to respond to a perceived threat or danger. Some things that you might experience during a stress response are:



Increased heart rate



Sweating



Heavy breathing or feeling short of breath



Inability to concentrate



Feeling excitable, anxious, or jumpy



Stomach ache or sensation of “butterflies” in your stomach

It may not always be obvious what causes our stress response, but we can make choices to respond positively.

Calming Strategies

Through S4, your child is learning that when we experience a stress response, there are strategies we can use to help us feel better so that we can make positive choices. Some of the strategies your child may be learning about in school are:

- Squeeze your hands together
- Take three slow breaths
- Get a drink of water
- Rub the outside of your legs
- Think about happy things
- Go for a walk/exercise
- Play a game
- Listen to music
- Play an instrument
- Go to your bedroom
- Draw or write in your journal
- Talk to a trusted adult
- Draw a picture
- Go to a safe place

Some things to keep in mind about stress:

- We all have stress in our lives
- Our response to stress may be similar or different than others
- When we respond to stress, we have a choice in the way we respond
- Our responses to stress affect ourselves AND others
- With the knowledge that we can affect others by our choices, we must make responsible choices to keep ourselves and the community safe

Types of Stress

We all experience stress in different amounts as we go about our daily lives. A small amount of stress is normal and even healthy, but we can easily become overwhelmed by too much stress and this can have harmful effects on our wellbeing.

This chart helps explain these different levels of stress:

Positive Stress:
A mild and short-lived activation of the stress response, resulting from common, everyday events and activities.
Tolerable Stress:
A stronger but still temporary activation of the stress response, caused by more severe, longer-lasting stressors. Children can overcome the effects of this level of stress through relationships with supportive adults.
Toxic Stress:
Strong, frequent, and prolonged activation of the stress response, caused by ongoing adversity without adequate adult support.

Adapted from *Toxic Stress: The Facts* from Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child.

When helping children learn to deal with these different types of stress, parents should know that the presence of supportive, caring relationships is the most important thing to help buffer some of the harmful effects stress.

Experiencing small amounts of stress with the support of caring adults is a key component for children in developing resilience.

Have a Family Discussion

Are there any other strategies for managing stress that you and your child can think of? Some other question you might discuss as a family are:

- What do we do as a family to keep stress to a minimum in our home?
- What kinds of things do we all enjoy that help keep stress away?
- How do we take time as a family to relax?
- What calming strategies do we use as a family to calm down when we are stressed?
- Do you notice if members of our family use different calming strategies? Why?
- Why is it important for our family to work together to help each other manage stress?

One of the ways you can help your child learn to cope with stress is by modelling some of the calming strategies yourself. Your child will learn from watching your own response to stress.