



# Recognizing stress in your children and how you can help



By *Aileen Morrison*

Educational Psychologist

When I was asked if I would like to write this article immediately a multitude of topics rushed into my mind. Should I write about bullying, ADHD or the impact of screen time on children? These are all important issues that are frequently written about and discussed. However within my practice I regularly see children and adolescents who are all experiencing varying levels of stress and anxiety and this got me thinking. The idea that children can experience anxiety and stress isn't one that is easy for us adults to digest.

As adults we all suffer from stress at one point or another, but do your children? Perhaps your answer is of course not! After all, children do not have jobs or bills to pay, so what on earth could they possibly have to worry about??? Unfortunately scientific research says that isn't the case as children do suffer from stress and anxiety. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), about 20% of children report worrying a great deal. Unfortunately, many parents greatly underestimate their children's emotions. Many parents seem to think that their school-age children are unaware of the stresses around them and are somehow immune to them. After all, their children not only have all their basic needs met, but perhaps they also have the latest technology or toys, and a full schedule of extracurricular activities so what do they have to worry about? However the reality is that even very young children have worries and feel stress to some degree. So stress is experienced by everyone; it is a mechanism established by the body to handle and adapt to difficult situations. While little amounts of stress can be helpful, too much negative stress can cause long-term psychological damage in children. Therefore, stress relief for children is of the utmost importance.

A child's age and stage of development will help determine how stressful a given situation may be. Changing teachers half way through the year may be a major event for a child in Grade 1 and merely an annoyance for someone in Grade 10. [Being short](#) may be a minor issue for a 5- or 6-year-old boy but a source of daily embarrassment for an [adolescent](#). How a child perceives and responds to stress depends in part on development, in part on experience, and in part on a child's individual temperament.

Realising that events we adults brush off as insignificant but can cause severe stress in children is the first step to acknowledging stress in children. The most important thing you can do to help them cope is to let them know you understand how they are feeling without dismissing their emotions as exaggerated or unnecessary.

While it's not always easy to recognize when children are stressed, short-term behavioural changes such as mood swings, acting out, changes in sleep patterns, or bedwetting can be indications. Some children have physical effects, including frequent stomach aches and headaches which may lead to a desire to miss school. Others have trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork. Some become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone. A child who is stressed also may overreact to minor incidents, have nightmares, become clingy, or have drastic changes in their academic performance.

Adults have their own techniques for managing stress, but your children have yet to develop the methods that can help reduce their worries. Children need help to develop these skills. So how can you help your children cope with stress? Try to remember that some level of stress is normal; let your child know that it's OK to feel angry, scared, lonely, or anxious and that other people share those feelings. Reassurance is important, so let them know that their feelings are valid.

It's very hard in today's hectic world but try to find time for your child each day. It is the **QUALITY** not quantity of time that matters. So whether they need to talk or just be in the same room with you, try to make yourself available. Don't force them to talk, even if you know what they're worried about something. Sometimes children just feel better when they know you have your full attention. Even as your child get older, quality time is important. It's really hard for some people to come home after work, get down on the floor, and play with their children or just talk to them about their day especially if they've had a stressful day themselves. But expressing interest shows your children that they're important to you and so are their feelings.

When children can't or won't discuss their stressful issues, try talking about what may have worried you when you were a child. This shows that you too had worries which they may be able to relate to. This also helps to normalise stress and let your children know that it is ok to feel whatever they feel.

Books can help young children identify with characters in stressful situations and learn how they cope. Exclusive Books have a wide selection of these kinds of books and below there are a few suggestions.

- ✓ Wilma Jean the Worry Machine by Julia Cook
- ✓ When my worries get too big by Kari Dunn Buron
- ✓ Stress can really get on your nerves by Trevor Roamin

Lastly it important to bear in mind that as parents you have many skills to deal with your child's stress. The time to seek professional support via a psychologist is when any change in behaviour persists, when stress is causing serious anxiety, or when the behaviour causes significant problems at school or at home and affects your child's ability to function with their daily life routine.

### *About the author*

*Aileen Morrison*

Educational Psychologist

☎ 0782823527

[aileenpsychologist@gmail.com](mailto:aileenpsychologist@gmail.com)

Aileen is based in Melville, JHB. She has a special interest in working with adolescents and children from the age of 11. Additionally Aileen works with adults who are dealing with anxiety, depression and other life stressors. Aileen also provides a variety of assessments which include full psycho-educational assessments; school readiness, and applications for concessions and exam accommodations.