



SPOTTING STRESS IN YOUR CHILD

Dr Nicole Carvill

Parenting in a pandemic is uncharted territory, pressing us to juggle more than ever while supporting our loved ones. The uncertainty and constantly shifting landscape is triggering stress in children that can be tricky to spot.



Changes in your child's mood, body language, appetite and behaviour can signal a stress response and a cry for help.

When kids lack the skills to explain big feelings like stress, they communicate their emotions through behaviour. If behaviour becomes challenging, parents tend to focus on the action rather than the cause. Spotting stress and reacting gently, as we do for babies, will help your child navigate their feelings and sense of safety at this unsettling time. Children learn to manage emotions through co-regulation with a parent or carer—where comfort and calm happen together. Self-regulation is a skill we master across our lifetime, not in the short window of childhood.

The stress response begins in the brain

When our stress load is too high, our brain enters fight or flight mode and floods the body with stress hormones. In kids, this significantly reduces their ability to think clearly and manage their emotions. At this point, punishment for perceived challenging behaviour can further stress the brain and overwhelm your child.

Where to find whole-family support

Emotions are contagious and often spread through the family when someone doesn't feel right. We're here to support you and your child through challenging times. You might also like to reach out to these wonderful organisations.



eheadspace

1800 650 890



Lifeline

13 11 14



Kids Helpline

1800 551 800

How to spot stress and support your child



Let's explore some common stress signals, what drives them and the practical strategies you can use to help your child.



Impulsive and hyperactive

Stress drains energy, so the body relies on adrenaline and cortisol to keep going. In this hyper state, kids have trouble calming down for quiet activities—the very thing we ask them to do when they're wound up.

- There's a big difference between quiet and calm. Hyper kids may seem to quieten down but don't internally calm down without burning off excess energy.
- Bounce on the trampoline, ride a bike or burn off steam actively in a way your child enjoys.



Increased hunger or food cravings

Ongoing stress burns a lot of energy, so the body seeks extra food to fill reserves. Children often seek out 'feel good' foods containing sugar and fat to dampen their emotions when they're stressed.

- Watch for clues that might explain increased appetite and cravings. During lockdown, high learning expectations, disrupted routine, and lack of social connection can trigger a stress response in kids.
- Pinpointing the trigger and helping your child problem-solve can ease stress and calm their appetite.
- Chewing crunchy foods like apples and carrots can regulate their nervous system.



Trouble listening & completing tasks.

Stress impacts the middle ear and can shut down the prefrontal cortex, dampening your child's ability to listen, access language and remember things.

- Reducing the amount of language we use and switching to indirect speech is best. Avoid asking big questions like "why aren't you packing up your toys?" and instead try "Let's pack this up together."
- Like adults, children seek out control when they feel uncertain about their world.
- Offer a sense of choice by saying, "I wonder if we could try this?" rather than directly telling them what to do.



Sensitive to noise and stimulation

When your child's stress response is activated, they're on high alert for danger, using every brain tool to help detect risk.

- In this heightened state, kids and adults can become more sensitive to noise.
- Have you ever noticed things sound louder at the end of a long day? That's because your stress response is activated.
- Aim to reduce sensory input around your child, including sounds, smell and lights. Some kids respond well to a mini-break with headphones on.



Physical changes, speaking loudly and shouting

Stress affects children mentally and physically. In the initial stages of stress, kids tend to seek social engagement to regulate. Once their brain has moved into fight or flight mode, you might find them withdrawn and curled up in a ball or lashing out physically at siblings.

- Stress can change how children perceive the world around them, leading them to talk loudly and shout without consideration for others.
- Other physical stress signals include nail-biting, thumb sucking, tummy aches and repetitive motions like jittery legs.
- Help your child burn stress and shift perception with physical activities they enjoy.



Teary and emotional

It's common for stressed kids to be teary and seek more comfort than usual.

- Start by reassuring your child it's okay not to feel okay, then work together to explore their feelings through talk or play.
- Extra cuddles, connection and one-on-one time are like chocolate to children.

