

Stress and Anxiety Age 4 Summary

Why Stress?

Young children and adults alike experience stress. Feelings of stress are naturally built-in mechanisms for human survival and thriving. These feelings are the body's way of warning you when there is danger and calling your attention to problems that need resolving. Children ages three and four learn about their strong feelings every day, and you, as a parent or someone in a parenting role, can help your child learn to identify and manage their stress—an important skill they will use throughout their lives.

Tip: Even though signs of stress and anxiety may look the same, they are different and require different approaches to handle each. While mild anxiety may respond well to coping strategies used to manage stress, a child experiencing anxiety may need additional help from a mental health professional to determine if they have an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are different from feelings of stress or mild anxiety, which are short-term.

STEP
1



Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- *"I noticed your eyes got wide, and you came running over. Are you feeling stressed?"*
- *"I noticed that you stayed right beside me instead of going to play with your friends at the new park. I wonder if you are feeling overwhelmed by the new place to play?"*
- *"Your sister cried when you took the toy. What do you think she is feeling?"*
- *"When your friend didn't get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?"*
- *"How did you feel when we went to the new playground this morning?"*

Trap: Be sure you talk about stress at a calm time when you are not stressed!

STEP
2



Teach New Skills

Learn together! Stress can be an integral part of people's daily lives, and you may not realize how it can influence every aspect of your day.

- Model behaviors (and your children will notice and learn!).
- Get exercise and fresh air.

- Remember to breathe.
- Talk about feelings regularly.
- Create quiet time.
- Set a goal for daily connection.
- Notice, name, and accept feelings regularly.
- Brainstorm coping strategies for yourself such as imagine a favorite place, take a walk, get a drink of water, take deep breaths, count to 50, draw, color, or build something.
- Create a calm-down space.
- Work on your child's feelings vocabulary.
- Share ideas on what can help them feel better.
- Create a family gratitude ritual.

STEP 3



PRACTICE

Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *"Show me how you hug your pillow in your safe base to calm your body."* This can be used when you observe their stress mounting.
- Accept Feelings.
- Recognize effort: *"I notice how you took deep breaths when you got frustrated. That's excellent!"*
- Practice deep breathing.

STEP 4



SUPPORT

Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills: *"You seem stressed. Are you feeling worried? What can you do to help yourself feel better?"*
- Learn about development. Becoming informed about your child's developmental milestones will offer you empathy and patience.
- Reflect on outcomes. *"That playdate with our friends was fun and not scary after all. What did you think?"*
- Stay engaged. Try out new and different coping strategies to see what works best.

STEP 5



RECOGNIZE

Recognize Efforts

- Notice even small successes: *"When you couldn't get your coat zipped, you took a deep breath and then asked for help. Way to keep your calm!"*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Include hugs as a way to appreciate one another.

Tip: Be specific. “Good job” does not seem to carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior -- “*You took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. Love seeing that!*” -- can promote more of the same.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

Trap: Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

Celebrate yourself for making it your parenting priority to cultivate the social and emotional skills most critical for your child’s success today and in the future!

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