



is a Program of The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

## **Kids Have Stress Too! – Especially at Back to School Time As a Parent, You Can Help!**

“Stress can infect and affect the physical, emotional, intellectual and academic well being of children. It can interfere with their motivation, attention, perception, memory and the entire learning process. There is a stress management technology and methodology that can help make them more stress-resistant and help them deal with their stressors in an appropriate and constructive manner.”

- *Dr. Harold Minden, Professor Emeritus, York University, Department of Psychology, and former Trustee of The Psychology Foundation of Canada*

Why is it important to be aware of how stress affects children? Well, evidence indicates that too many environmental stresses early in a child’s life can have negative effects on his/her overall long-term development. In fact, external stressors can have more physical effects on the nervous systems of very young children than they can on older individuals, and can alter the course of brain development. The outcome of chronic stress in children can be increased health problems, learning difficulties and socialization problems. The good news is that parents and caregivers are often in the best position to teach their children life-long stress management skills, and there are many strategies that can help! There is no better time to practice some of these strategies than in the fall when children are going back to school, and in the case of some university-aged children, going *away* to school. Here are some simple, yet important strategies parents can use to help:

### **Back to School Stress Management Strategies for the Family**

#### *Younger Children*

#### **1. Start preparing your kids for school at least a week before:**

- Shop for clothes, groceries and back to school supplies that are needed.
- Practice the route to school so they know how to get there safely. If possible, meet the teachers and visit the school with them ahead of time so that they know their way around and feel more comfortable, especially for those kids that are more anxious or are going to a new school for the first time.
- Have your kids get back into their school time schedule, including a regular sleeping routine and morning and evening rituals, such as making lunch or setting clothes out the night before.
- If possible, in a fun way, have your kids review some of their school material before school starts (e.g., multiplication tables), to get them thinking and reading again and to help them remember what they covered last year.
- Review with your child, the daily routine that he/she will follow. For example, “You will get up at [time of day]...”, “Your first class will be...”, “I will pick you up from school

Information is provided by The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) as part of PFC’s *Kids Have Stress Too!*® Program. Strategies provided are only guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. To find a registered psychologist in your area, please visit the Canadian Psychological Association Web site at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca).



is a Program of The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

- at [time and location]”...etc., so they know what to expect. You might even want to write out the schedule of daily activities as a fun exercise to do together.
- Arrange fun “play dates” with neighborhood children that go to your child’s school, so that they can develop some friends and a support system before and after school starts.
2. **Prepare a “Must Know” list for the school and teacher.** The list will provide important information for the teacher, school office, or day care staff, such as allergies, illnesses, physical limitations, or any necessary accommodations that might need to be made, such as the best seating arrangement for your child in the classroom.
  3. **Remind your kids that you are there for them at all times.** Send a little note with your child in their lunch box or give them a small object from home to comfort them if they are feeling anxious when at school. Show your children every day that you love them by giving them a hug or telling them how much you care. Congratulate them on milestones that they reach, no matter how small. Remember to tell your child that it is ok to make mistakes – school is all about learning and improving each day.
  4. **Listen carefully and respectfully to your children when they talk and watch for signs of stress – both before school starts and several weeks after school begins.** Note that signs of stress are not always obvious. Don’t forget to *ask* your kids if they have any concerns or worries about the new school year, then follow up on their concerns and provide information, reassurance and problem solving help, as needed. Refer to the “Some Signs of Stress in Children” chart included in this article. If you think your child may be dealing with stress that seems more serious than usual, like a learning disability, AD/HD or severe anxiety, consider seeking some additional information and/or professional help from your family doctor.
  5. **Be careful not to overload your child with too many competitive activities outside of school.** Sometimes the best cure for stress is just to have some quiet time, or to have them be involved in a variety of non-competitive activities in the community. Kids also need some time on their own. Listening to music, playing with a pet, reading, or playing quietly may help them feel better. Doing nothing is fine too!
  6. **Finally, maintain an optimistic outlook yourself.** Be positive and help to make school fun. Don’t complain about a teacher or the school in front of your children. Watch also that your *own* stress at this time of year does not negatively affect your children – they will pick up on your reactions and this can create even more anxiety for them. Practice good stress management for yourself too!

Information is provided by The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) as part of PFC’s *Kids Have Stress Too!*® Program. Strategies provided are only guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. To find a registered psychologist in your area, please visit the Canadian Psychological Association Web site at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca).

**SOME SIGNS OF STRESS IN CHILDREN**

<p>Most parents and caregivers can identify behavioral issues in children because these behaviors are visible. Some of these <b>BEHAVIORS</b> might include:</p> <p><b>Whining, Poor Listening, Crying, Nail Biting, Day Dreaming, Fighting with Friends &amp; Family, Being Overly Cautious, Poor School Performance, Lack of Appetite or Eating More than Usual</b></p> <p>It is very important to remember that <b>STRESS</b> may be behind these behaviors that are seen.</p>
<p>If children are experiencing stress, their <b>bodies, minds and feelings</b> are also affected. Stress can result in the above kinds of behaviors, but physical, mental and emotional symptoms also occur when a child is under stress. These signs may not be as obvious as the behavioral signs, but they are there. For example, you might notice some of the behavioral signs above when a child is feeling afraid h/she might not be able to keep up with schoolwork when a new school year begins.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BODY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Some <b>physical</b> signs of stress might include:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Tense Muscles, Headaches or Stomach-aches, Rapid Heartbeat, Being Cold, Skin Rash, Shakiness, Disturbed Sleep, Fatigue, Illness</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>MIND</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Some <b>mental</b> effects of stress might include:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Poor Concentration, Whirling Mind, Forgetfulness, Difficulty Problem-Solving, Being Easily Distracted, Confusion, Being Irrational</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FEELINGS</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Some <b>feelings</b> that may indicate stress might include:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fear, Anxiety, Frustration, Sadness, Anger, Being Overwhelmed, Panic, Extreme Sensitivity, Irritability, Helplessness, Hopelessness, Being Threatened</b></p>

*For Young People Going to University/College*

University can be especially stressful for youth – especially those living away from home and those starting university for the first time. New classmates, new teachers, and an increase in workload can increase stress levels, and stress can be magnified by the social and physical changes your children are going through as well.

Information is provided by The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) as part of PFC’s *Kids Have Stress Too!*® Program. Strategies provided are only guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. To find a registered psychologist in your area, please visit the Canadian Psychological Association Web site at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca).

**1. Prepare your child as much as possible for university ahead of time:**

- Help them obtain the necessary course materials and school supplies.
- Visit the university and teachers/professors ahead of time, if possible.
- Register for classes as early as possible so that they are more likely to get their first choices. Walk and time the route to class locations, since some university/college campuses are very large.
- Settle living and moving arrangements well in advance, if living away from home.
- If possible, have them get a head start on some of the required reading.

**2. Discuss key issues ahead of time that will help your child to manage the university or college environment, such as:**

- Getting enough sleep, nutrition and exercise
- Managing a large workload and time management strategies
- Where to go on campus if they need help or have a crisis
- Managing their money, sticking to a budget, where to get money in an emergency
- Safety issues to be aware of on campus and at social functions

**3. Help to create a support system for your child:**

- Have your child meet up with others ahead of time who are in the same classes or going to the same university so they know someone at school when they get there.
- Provide your child with emergency numbers to call and resources they may need at some point, such as Kids Help Phone (**1-800-668-6868** or [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)), which is an organization that provides twenty-four hour, confidential phone and online counseling, information and support to kids.

**4. Remind your kids that you are there for them at all times.** Send regular emails or care packages to show you care. Visit them on campus when they are settled in, and have them show you around. Make sure your child knows where to reach you during the day or in the evening, even if it is just to say “hi”. Congratulate them on milestones that they reach, no matter how small. Remember to tell your child that it is ok to make mistakes – school is all about learning and improving.

**5. Listen carefully and respectfully to your children when they talk and watch for signs of stress – both before school starts and after school begins.** Note that signs of stress are not always obvious. Don't forget to *ask* your kids if they have any concerns or worries about the new school year, then follow up on their concerns and provide information, reassurance and problem solving help, as needed. If you think your child may be dealing with stress that seems more serious than usual, like depression, an eating disorder, or anxiety problem, consider seeking some additional information and/or professional help from your family doctor.

Information is provided by The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) as part of PFC's *Kids Have Stress Too!*® Program. Strategies provided are only guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. To find a registered psychologist in your area, please visit the Canadian Psychological Association Web site at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca).



is a Program of The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

- 6. **Finally, maintain an optimistic outlook yourself and be a motivator.** Be positive and encouraging in this new chapter of your child’s life. Watch also that your *own* stress at this time of year does not negatively affect your children – they will pick up on your reactions and this can create even more anxiety for them. For example, you may be upset and nervous that your child is moving away from home for the first time. Try to be excited for them and show them that you have confidence in them. Trust that you have equipped them with life strategies they will use to manage their own stress.

"Any time of transition, including back to school, can create a range of emotions in children, including worry and stress. Helping your children with reliable information and a few simple tips on how they can have control over their everyday lives often helps put things into perspective for the family as a whole."

*- Dr. Ester Cole, past Chair, PFC and past President, Ontario Psychological Association*

\*\*\*\*\*

**The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC)** is a national registered charity that supports parents and strengthens families through a number of initiatives including creating educational resources, developing training programs for professionals, and delivering community-based education. Founded in 1974 to promote the understanding and use of sound psychological knowledge to better people’s lives, the Foundation is guided by a Board of Trustees comprised of psychologists and business and community leaders. PFC’s programs, like *Kids Have Stress Too!®*, *Parenting for Life* and *Diversity in Action*, help Canadians better understand how to manage situations and relationships more effectively at home, school, community and work. To find out more, or to order materials, please visit PFC’s Web sites at [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org) or [www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org).

*Written by: Krista Saleh*

Information is provided by The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) as part of PFC’s *Kids Have Stress Too!®* Program. Strategies provided are only guidelines and are not meant to be prescriptive. To find a registered psychologist in your area, please visit the Canadian Psychological Association Web site at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca).

