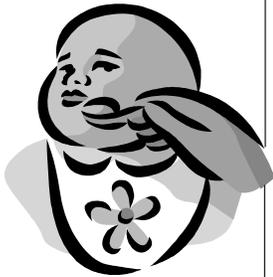


Stress Reactions in Children

Children are affected not only by a crisis itself, but also by their parents' reactions to the crisis. How children react depends upon how secure their world was prior to the crisis, the nature of the crisis, and their ability to understand exactly what has happened. Although it's not possible to predict how each child will react, many children of similar ages have these common reactions.

Infant/Toddler (Birth – 2 yrs.)

- Agitated behavior — crying, thumbsucking
- Aggression — kicking, hitting, biting, throwing things
- Changes in bodily functions — eating, sleeping, elimination



Preschool (3 – 5 yrs.)

- Separation anxiety — clinging, refusing to sleep alone, wanting to be held constantly
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares
- Regression in toileting, dressing, feeding self
- Rigidity — unable to adapt easily to minor changes in routine
- Withdrawal
- Aggression — both verbal and physical
- Brief episodes of sadness
- Reenactment of traumatic event in play



School Age (6 – 10/12 yrs.)

- Concentration difficulties
- Behavioral changes — the quiet become frantic; the energetic become lethargic
- Physical ailments — headaches, stomachaches, dizziness
- Lowered impulse control
- Increased dependence
- Decreased trust in adults
- Fantasies about happy ending to situation
- Use of play, art, music, or dance to express emotions instead of words

Adolescent (10/12 – 18 yrs.)



- Resentment of unfairness of situation
- Unrealistic expectations of self and others
- Frustration — producing rebellion
- Avoidance and denial
- Reluctance to trust or open self to others
- Physical ailments
- Eating/sleeping disorders
- Depression; despair about the future
- Lowered impulse control
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Decision to take on adult role to create sense of control

How to Help

Provide extra attention and care; there will be an increased need for physical closeness.



Discuss the situation. Children need factual information as well as the opportunity to talk about their feelings. They need to hear that what they are feeling is normal and expected, although it may be uncomfortable. Be prepared to talk about it many times.

Accept children's expressions of anger and frustration. Help them to recognize and name the emotions they are experiencing. Model healthy ways to express them.

Look to the future. Planning for upcoming events is a step toward recovery.

Know and utilize your resources. Help is available to those who ask.

Source: Crisis Response Training by NOVA (National Organization for Victim Assistance). Used with permission.



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