

Hand-out for Parents

STRESS AND YOUR CHILD

What is stress?

Stress is a normal occurrence. It's our body's response to feeling afraid, overworked, overstimulated, threatened or excited. A little stress actually helps us feel alert, energized and interested in life. However, too much stress, especially when we can't control it, can interfere with our ability to manage everyday tasks and challenges. It can also lead to physical and emotional health problems.

Kids have stress too

Even very young children experience stress. However, it can be hard for parents to recognize childhood stress because it shows up in so many different ways. Stress causes negative emotions, so sadness, anxiety or irritability can be signs of stress in children. But these feelings can also cause physical or behaviour problems:

- headaches, tummy aches, disturbed appetite or sleep problems
- tantrums, "acting out," difficulty getting along with friends, not wanting to go to school

Where does children's stress come from?

Some sources of children's stress are obvious: family conflict, divorce, moving, being in hospital, a poor relationship with a teacher, being bullied or feeling misunderstood or unloved.

But children also experience stress from everyday experiences – separation from parents, conflict with siblings, rushed mornings. Some children are easily stressed by sensory and social stimulation: sights, noises and textures, new people and situations.

Helping children with "normal" stress

Even babies and toddlers begin to develop ways of coping with stress, such as thumbsucking or



cuddling stuffed toys or blankies. Unstructured play is also a great stress reliever for young children. However, children also need support from adults to cope with stress. **Here are three important ways parents can help:**

Connection Create strong parent/child relationships by spending time with your children and listening to them, showing love and affection.

Home environment A healthy, secure home life is a buffer against stress. Comfortable daily routines help children feel their world is predictable and safe. Provide good food, enough rest, and lots of time for physical activity, play and relaxation.

Comfort In order for children to learn to comfort themselves, they first must know what it is like to be comforted. Physical contact – hugs and cuddling – is one of the best ways to relieve your child's stress. Research has shown that nurturing touch helps young children build the brain pathways that will help them cope with stress later in life.