

Understanding stress

Stress is a normal reaction to life's changes and challenges.

What can cause stress?

Children and young people experience stress for many reasons

Stress often arises during times of change or uncertainty – even when the change is expected or positive. But stress can also be triggered by ongoing pressures, such as conflict at home, relationship difficulties or feeling unsafe or unsupported.

Stress can be result from a single event or build up over time. When it becomes overwhelming, it can impact on mental health and wellbeing, as well as learning and development.

Changes can happen in many aspects of a child or young person's life including shifts in their:

- physical environment (i.e., moving house, experiencing a natural disaster, or starting a new school)
- economic circumstances (i.e., unexpected financial loss, or job loss of family members)
- social environment (i.e., losing friendships or feeling isolated after moving house)

It's important to remember that feeling stressed is not an anxiety condition. An anxiety condition is when someone experiences:

- anxious feelings which are consistently very intense
- feelings that persist well after the stressful event has passed
- distress that interferes with their capacity to learn, socialise and do everyday things.

Many factors can make children and young people susceptible to stress

Children and young people are more likely to experience stress in the following situations:

- transitions – for example, starting early learning, school or university
- experiencing a serious illness or injury
- isolation or loneliness
- experiencing bullying
- abuse (past or current)
- family or parental stress
- family circumstances – break-ups; conflict; aggression).

Stress and brain development

Stress is a normal response.

There are times when stress can have a positive effect. It can help children and young people adapt to their environment and use new skills. In turn, this supports their learning and development.

However, stress can also impact on healthy brain development – particularly when it's ongoing and the child or young person doesn't have enough support. For more detail see our Brain development fact sheet.

Signs of stress in children and young people

Stress is the body's reaction to change or overload. It can show up in children and young people's behaviour, emotions, body and thinking. This can look like:

- sleep changes or tiredness
- changes in appetite or interest in food
- returning to earlier behaviours (such as bedwetting or needing frequent comfort)
- not enjoying or participating in usual interests or experiences

- withdrawing from friends and family
- changes in engagement in learning or academic results
- irritability and frustration
- fearfulness or constant worrying
- tearfulness and crying
- poor concentration
- being physically run down or feeling unwell (for example, stomach pain or headaches)
- mood swings
- changes to levels of motivation.

Many of these signs of stress are similar to an adult's experiences. Being mindful of the different ways that stress manifests in people is an important first step in offering support.

Risk and protective factors

Children and young people respond to stress in different ways.

Some are able to adapt and manage difficult situations, while others may feel overwhelmed. If stress isn't recognised and supported, it can impact mental health and wellbeing.

Understanding what makes a child or young person more vulnerable to stress- and what helps protect them-can help us notice and support them. These influences are often referred to as risk and protective factors. This can help us understand why two people may respond differently to the same situation.

Some things can make children and young people more vulnerable to stress (risk factors), while others help protect their wellbeing (protective factors).

Protective factors

Examples of protective factors for children and young people faced with stress include:

- a stable and warm home and community environment

- strong relationships with family, peers and educators
- a supportive environment in their early learning service or school
- a belief in their ability to manage challenges, based on past experiences
- an optimistic outlook and hopefulness about the future
- social and emotional skills, such as recognising and expressing emotions
- good communication skills, including the ability to ask for help
- previous experiences of asking for and receiving support when they need it
- routines and consistency in their lives
- play and participating in a range of interests (like reading, art, sport, dance and music)
- eating well, getting good sleep, staying active
- having access to other supports if required, such as a mentor or counsellor.

Connection to country and community is a protective factor for many First Nations peoples.

Risk factors

Below are some examples of risk factors for children and young people.

- experiencing trauma or ongoing adversity
- lack of support or unrecognised learning, behavioural or sensory needs
- family conflict, separation or violence
- lack of connection or being excluded
- ongoing difficulties with peer relationships
- living with a parent or carer experiencing mental illness, substance misuse or incarceration
- ongoing exposure to stress without additional support
- experiences of discrimination, racism or cultural dislocation.

What can educators do?

Educators can support children and young people by noticing signs of stress, creating supporting environments, and responding in ways that support mental health and wellbeing. These might include:

- building strong and trusting relationships
- providing clear routines and structure
- modelling and supporting problem-solving skills
- creating calm areas in the classroom
- teaching social and emotional awareness and skills
- being alert to changes in behaviour, mood or engagement
- encouraging play and creativity
- modelling calm, respectful behaviour
- acknowledging and validating feelings without the need to “fix” them
- co-regulate emotions through slow breathing and calm, attuned responses
- encouraging healthy routines for sleep, staying active and eating well
- promoting respectful relationships and addressing bullying through education and whole-school approaches
- partnering with families and communities to share observations and strengthen support
- normalising and helping children and young people get extra support when needed.

These strategies help promote self-regulation, reduce stress, and support wellbeing and learning.

Provide mental health awareness and education activities

Discuss mental health and wellbeing with children and young people as well as promoting and encouraging help-seeking. Encourage ways to look after yourself such as:

- staying active
- eating well
- connecting with friends, family and community
- getting enough sleep
- limiting alcohol and other drugs.

For some children and young people this might include connecting to country, to culture and other things that are important to their beliefs and values.

If more support is required

If you have concerns about a child or young person, follow your learning community’s processes. This might include talking to your wellbeing or leadership team and using tools such as the [BETLS observational tool](#) to help understand what support might be needed.

Be You Resources

Learn more about what to do [Before recommending additional support](#).

Learn more about [Recommending additional support](#).

Learn more about [mental health services](#) in Australia.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people’s behaviour; inquiring sensitively about your concerns; and providing support for children, young people and their families, in the [Early Support](#) domain.

Bibliography

Visit [Understanding stress](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

