

Helping kids cope with stress at school

Dealing with stress is nothing new for adults, but for kids stress can be a scary feeling that is difficult to deal with. Starting a new school year, in a new class, with a new teacher can trigger stress in a child and it's important for parents to know how to guide their children through these new feelings.

“Even small incidents can cause stress in children because they haven't yet learnt how to cope,” says Dr. Gerry Predy, Senior Medical Officer of Health for Alberta Health Services. “If you're in a state of high stress for a long period of time, physical problems may occur.”

Physical signs of stress in children include head or stomach aches, nervousness or trembling, and the onset of bedwetting. Behaviour signs include fighting or acting out, sleep problems or nightmares, and crying or withdrawing.

“The best way to help children handle stress is to talk to them,” says Dr. Predy. “Talk openly about feelings and work together to come up with possible solutions to problems. Have your child think about or actually pretend how he would deal with a possible stressful situation but, most importantly, ensure there is a safe environment for your child.”

Children can also be taught tips for managing stress:

- Exercise, play and have fun.
- Focus on taking slow deep breaths – each breath should be slower than the one before. Practice this with your child whenever they are stressed.
- Do progressive muscle relaxation. Tighten one muscle; hold the tension; release and take a deep breath. You should feel more relaxed.
- Get lots of sleep and eat well.
- Have a quiet time. Once a week or more have a scheduled time for quiet. No T.V., radio, or talking. Take the time to read or just daydream.
- Encourage your child to verbalize feelings.
- Focus on reducing components into smaller manageable segments.

Residents with any other health-related concerns can call Health Link Alberta to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 780-408-LINK (5465) or outside the local calling area, toll free at 1-866-408-LINK (5465).

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.5 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.