

over us or whose expectations we feel we have to meet. Thus, it's not the situation that causes all the stress. Our beliefs about the situation are a big piece of the puzzle.

Although different individuals will find different events more or less stressful, stress in children is usually caused by:

- New, unfamiliar or unpredictable situations
- Unclear expectations
- Expectations of something unpleasant (e.g., pain)
- Fear of failure (socially or academically)
- Major developmental "hurdles" (moving from elementary to middle school, leaving home)

Symptoms of Stress

The effects of stress vary from one person to another and each person may develop unique symptoms or individual styles of handling stress. Some environments (e.g., homes, schools, etc.) are more stressful than others. Additionally, constitutional factors, including gender and temperament, play a significant role in how stress is perceived and handled. Stress is cumulative and progressive, and improved resources and coping skills are often necessary to reduce its ill effects.

There are generally three recognized stages of stress marked by phases of physical changes: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. In the first stage of stress, the body goes into "red alert" with an increase in heart rate and breathing as the individual considers a course of action. This is followed by "resistance" where the body attempts to slow down and return to "normal." If the stressful event continues or if the individual is unable to adapt to the situation, exhaustion may follow.

Symptoms of stress in children: Symptoms of stress in young children may be difficult to distinguish from symptoms of minor illness. Be alert for signs of irritability, sleeping, toileting or eating difficulties, fearfulness, difficulties adapting to change in routine and clinginess, or use of key words such as "sad" or "afraid." As children get older, their responses to stress may include more attention-seeking behaviors, mood changes, avoidance of certain activities, isolation (such as the adolescent who retreats more and more to his or her room), school refusal or changes in the quality of schoolwork, sleeping difficulties and physical complaints (headache, stomachache). Seek help for your child if the symptoms persist or you are not able to identify the basis for these concerns. Your school psychologist, social worker, counselor or family physician can help locate appropriate resources.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Children who experience overwhelming stress may develop Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD refers to stress resulting from a specific incident: an incident severe enough to cause profound damage to an individual's ability to

from reoccurring. Relaxation can be especially effective when used in conjunction with the rehearsal of a stressful situation before it occurs. Some children might need professional assistance to learn effective relaxation techniques. Also, rememb