

What to look for:

The following are common signs of chronic stress in school-aged children. Symptoms can vary greatly depending on age, temperament, development, ability, social skills, and coping strategies. Although many of these behaviors are common, unexplained increases or decreases in any of them lasting two weeks or more are cause for concern.



- Increased frequency of sadness, crying, or upset.
- Added fears, worries, or avoidance of situations.
- Asking for more attention, assurance, or physical contact than usual.
- Greater irritability, anger, frustration, hostility, and/or aggression.
- Trouble falling or staying asleep, and/or having bad dreams.
- Significant changes in diet/food intake, and/or activity or energy level.
- Wanting to be alone or unwilling to interact with friends or family.
- Increased difficulty getting along with other children, friends, or family members.
- Refusal to attend school.
- Problems with schoolwork and grades.
- Struggles to adjust to school or other structured settings.
- Frequent headaches, stomachaches, or not feeling “well.”
- Increased stubborn behavior or refusal to comply with requests.
- Negative self-talk and/or body image.
- Repeated incidents that result in injuries (cuts, bruises, sprains, bones, or head trauma).
- Statements of hopelessness, despair, or wishing to be dead.



Tips for how to respond:

Children undergo significant physical, emotional cognitive, and brain growth during elementary school years. They need consistent support, coaching, clear expectations, and modeling from adults, and require increasing opportunities to explore, solve problems, and make decisions on their own when safe and appropriate. This enables them to learn to successfully cope with stressors, understand their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, increases their confidence, and helps them to develop healthy relationship skills.

- Create and keep regular, predictable daily routines including exercise, meals, and bedtime.
- Reinforce family values and set clear limits and expectations for behavior.
- Regularly discuss plans, being clear to inform what is happening and when.
- Take time to discuss worries and concerns that arise, and brainstorm solutions.
- Set aside regular time daily for care, connection, listening, and shared activities.
- Encourage creativity and play, and foster self-expression.
- Encourage activities with prosocial peers and friends, including healthy group activities.
- Allow choices regarding activities and other decisions when appropriate.
- Play together, including games, outdoor activities, dancing, singing, and crafting.
- Practice stress-relieving strategies together like breathing exercises and brain breaks.
- Ask for support from family, friends, trusted adults, and classroom teachers.
- Speak to pediatrician or family doctor to discuss health problems, allergies, or other medical issues.
- Reach out to a mental health professional, community elder, or family support service if concerns persist.
- **In the event of a crisis, call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org**