

Discussion points

- Effective and efficient motion
- Using shoulders and arms
- Eye-hand coordination

Motor

Young Preschooler

Parent educator resource

- *Motor Development for the Young Preschooler*



Parent handout

- *Your Child or Your Young Child, Young Preschooler: Motor Development*

Process

I. Rapport-building

II. Observation. Throughout the visit, consider the *whole child* as you share specific observations related to each domain of development.

III. Discussion. Incorporate throughout the visit.

A. **Review** your previous visit using the Personal Visit Record. Ask parents what they noticed as they practiced the parent follow-up activity(s).

B. **Parent comments and concerns.** Invite parents to share, now and throughout the visit.



C. **Developmental characteristics.** Use the handout, *Motor Development*. Ask which of these characteristics parents may be observing already. After the visit, record observations on the form, *Milestones: 2-3 Years*.

D. **Effective and efficient motion.** (Refer to the resource, *Motor Development for the Young Preschooler*, for supporting information.)

1. By this age, most children have acquired the basic movements they will use for the rest of their lives.
2. These basic movements will be refined into fundamental movements, which provide the building blocks for the complex movements of later childhood and adulthood.
 - a. Effective movements are those that are intentional, controlled, and that accomplish an intended purpose.
 - b. Efficient movements are those that are smooth, don't use more energy than necessary, and involve only sufficient motion to accomplish the intended purpose.
3. By experimenting with what his body will do, the child learns about concepts such as up and down, fast and slow.
4. An energy boost between ages 2 and 3 years drives the child to be very active and causes an increase in muscle strength.

E. **Using shoulders and arms**

1. While learning to walk, the child's motor development has been concentrated in his lower body and legs.
2. The arms and shoulders are important for balance. They form the physical foundation for writing.
3. Large movements, such as making circles with the arms from the shoulders, using sweeping motions with the arms, and pushing and pulling, help develop the shoulder muscles.

F. Eye-hand coordination

1. The child has been able to accurately reach for and grasp a desired object for some time.
2. Information from the sensory system—in this case, the visual system—is processed by the brain and the appropriate motor response occurs.
3. As the neural pathways coordinating the child's eyes and hands are used and refined, fine motor movements become smoother, more controlled, and more skillful.
4. Eye-hand coordination is necessary for using a pencil and, later, for writing.

IV. Parent-child activity: **Racket Play**

A. Materials

- Paper plates
- Wooden paint stirrers or paper towel tubes
- Duct tape or wide packing tape
- Latex balloons
- Yarn or string
- Scissors
- Wrapping paper tube
- Small magnet
- Fish shapes cut from construction paper or lightweight cardboard
- Paper clips
- Toddler book

B. Rationale. Tell the parents why this activity is important.

1. Aiming at an object increases eye-hand coordination.
2. Using an implement, such as a racket, gives the child practice in judging distances beyond his hand and aiming at a target.
3. Using a pencil also requires the child to control an implement that extends beyond his hand. This control is necessary for writing.
4. Swinging the racket and fishing pole uses large arm movements and helps strengthen shoulder, arm, and hand muscles.

C. Parent-child interaction

1. Racket Play
 - a. Make two rackets by securely taping a paint stirrer to the back of a stiff paper plate. A paper towel tube, which has been flattened on one end, can be used instead of the paint stirrer.
 - b. The rackets can be made before the visit or the parent can make them during the visit for the child.
 - c. Partially blow up a latex balloon. Discuss with the parent safety in using balloons. Never leave the child unsupervised with a balloon because pieces of popped balloon are choking hazards. Latex balloons are thicker and resist popping.
 - d. Place the balloon on the floor and have the parent show the child how to hit it with the racket so that it scoots along the floor. The parent and child can scoot the balloon back and forth between them with the rackets.
 - e. Next, tie a length of string or yarn to the balloon and tape it to the top of a doorway to hang down to the height of the child's chest. The yarn piece can be held if a doorway is unavailable.
 - f. Have the parent show the child how to hit the balloon with the racket. Allow the child to play as long as he wants.
 - g. When the child can hit the balloon with the racket accurately, remove the balloon from the string and show the child how to hit the balloon while it is in the air. Begin by having the child hit the balloon with his hand, then progress to the racket.
 - h. Give the parent the second racket and have her hit the balloon back and forth with the child. Not all children will be able to do this, but encourage the parent and child to practice.
 - i. A yarn ball or large pom pom may be substituted for the balloon.

2. Book sharing. Have the parent read the book to the child, labeling body parts as she reads.
3. Parent follow-up. Ask the parents to do the following during the time between visits:
 - a. Give their child opportunities to use implements that extend his hand, such as playing with the rackets.
 - b. Allow their child to scribble with crayons, or pencils, and blank paper several times a week. Use large pieces of paper, to encourage large arm movements, if possible.

- D. **Shared observation.** Help the parents observe their child's play and consider these questions:
1. Was the child able to hit the balloon along the floor with the racket.
 2. Was it easier for the child to hit the balloon while it was in the air with his hand or with the racket?
 3. Did the child's accuracy improve with practice?

- E. **Additional activity.** Use this activity if time remains in the visit.
1. Tie a small magnet to the end of a string about 24 inches long; tie the other end to a narrow wrapping paper tube.
 2. Cut fish shapes out of lightweight cardboard and attach a paper clip where the mouth of the fish would be.
 3. Have the parent show the child how to catch fish by touching the magnet to the paper clip.
 4. A short nursery rhyme can be written on the side of each fish. As the child catches the fish, the parent can read the rhyme to him.

V. Summary

- A. **Key observations.** Restate one or two key observations you have made about the child's development.
- B. **Parents' strength.** Point out a strength you observed in the parents.
- C. **Parent follow-up.** Remind parents to continue with the follow-up to the activity(s). Tell parents that you'll be eager to hear about their experiences with the follow-up activity(s) at your next visit.

Discussion points

- Motor development
- Cause and effect
- Parenting topic

Motor

Step and Launch

Parent educator resource

- *The Development of Gross Motor Abilities*



Parent handouts

- *Your Child or Your Young Child, Motor and Intellectual Development, 3, 4, or 5 Years*
- *Gross Motor Development During the Preschool Years*
- *Building Reasoning Skills*, p. 453

Process

I. Rapport-building.

II. Observation. Throughout the visit, consider the *whole child* as you share specific observations related to each domain of development.

III. Discussion. Incorporate throughout the visit.

A. **Review** your previous visit using the Personal Visit Record. Ask parents what they noticed as they practiced the parent follow-up activity(s).

B. **Parent comments and concerns.** Invite parents to share, now and throughout the visit.



C. **Developmental characteristics.** Use the handouts, *Motor and Intellectual Development*, that are appropriate for the child's age. Ask which of these characteristics parent may be observing already. After the visit, record observations on the form, *Milestones: 3-4, 4-5, or 5-6 Years*.



D. **Motor development.** Use the handout, *Gross Motor Development During the Preschool Years*, to discuss. (Refer to the resource, *The Development of Gross Motor Abilities*, for supporting information.) Gross motor development affects all other areas of growth. Movement activates neural wiring, which involves the whole body. As motor circuits mature in progressively higher areas of the brain, the movements they control grow progressively more purposeful and coordinated. Motor development enables a child to use his body in conjunction with his intellectual abilities to actively explore his environment. It can help his self-esteem as he sees his skills improving, and it provides a positive outlet for stress. Besides maturation of his motor circuits, the most important factor in a preschooler's acquisition of gross motor skills is opportunity—both to learn what his body can do and to practice his abilities. He learns best when he can explore without fear of criticism or correction. The activity in this plan gives children the opportunity to:

1. Discover what actions their bodies are capable of doing and how they can effect change on objects.
2. Discover what their bodies are capable of doing as they participate in purposeful movement experiences. Purposeful movement requires thoughtful decisions. Young children who learn to think through a movement before doing it will find it easier to master more advanced motor tasks.
3. Develop eye-foot coordination, a perceptual motor ability, as they coordinate putting their foot to an object to produce a desired result.
4. Develop positive self-esteem as they master appropriate movement.



E. **Cause and effect.** Use the handout, *Building Reasoning Skills*, to discuss.

1. Children learn they can produce desired results and effect change.
2. They learn that as they make changes the results vary and that they can produce the same or similar results repeatedly.

3. They learn that they can make predictions about what will happen to objects.
4. They learn about the concepts of heavy and light.



- F. **Parenting topic.** Choose a topic from the Parenting Topics section of the guide based on the family's need. Use the parent handout to discuss it with the parents. If appropriate, include the child in the discussion.

IV. Parent-child activity: **Step and Launch**

A. **Materials**

- A wooden board or piece of stiff cardboard (approximately ½-in. by 4-in. by 18-in.) for the launcher and a wooden block (approximately 2-in. by 2-in. by 4-in.) for the fulcrum
- Soft objects to launch: sponge, feather, bean bag, paper cup, pompom ball, etc.
- A small ball
- Children's book dealing with movement

B. **Rationale.** Tell the parents why this activity is important.

1. It promotes the development of gross motor abilities, specifically eye-foot coordination.
2. It provides a movement experience that is fun and purposeful, and promotes coordination.
3. It teaches children about cause and effect.

C. **Parent-child interaction**

1. **Step and Launch**
 - a. Set the step launcher on the floor with the longer piece (the launcher) on top of and at a right angle to the wooden block (fulcrum).
 - b. Set the collection of objects nearby so the child can choose what to put on the launcher.
 - c. Give the child plenty of opportunity to explore the objects and experiment with them before starting the activity.
 - d. Explain to the parents that they may need to help the child get started by modeling the activity one time.
 - e. Explain that children love to see parents involved in active play, and by participating they are showing the child that he and the activity have value.
 - f. Tell the child to choose an object and to place it on the "launchpad," the part of the board that is touching the floor.
 - g. Tell the parent to step on the raised part of the board in order to launch the object.
 - h. Have the child take a turn.
 - i. Tell the parent to ask questions that will encourage the child to use his thinking skills—Where do you think the object will go? Which object will go higher? How could you make it go higher? What would happen if you stepped harder on the launcher? What would happen if you moved the block?
2. **Book sharing/Literacy experience**
 - a. Give the book to the child and tell him to have the parent read it.
 - b. Help the parent notice if the child relates any of the activity to the book.
 - c. If the child requests, have the parent re-read the book or give the book to the child to look at.
3. **Parent follow-up.** Ask the parents to do the following during the time between visits.
 - a. Create similar launchers using sizes of wood or cardboard.
 - b. With their child, collect a variety of lightweight household materials to launch.
 - c. Spend time with their child launching objects and asking "What if?" types of questions to encourage experimentation.
 - d. Look for age-appropriate books in the library or bookstore to read to their child about movement.

D. **Shared observation.** Help the parents observe their child's play and consider these questions.

1. Was the child able to coordinate his body, eyes, and foot to send the object up in the air?
2. Did he use the same foot consistently, or did he tend to go back and forth between the right and the left?
3. Was the child able to think ahead how to use his body to perform the task with or without a demonstration?

4. Did the child have the necessary strength, balance, and coordination to do the activity?
 5. If the child had difficulty, did he persist?
 6. Did he repeat the activity and practice it to develop proficiency?
 7. Did he take the initiative and show curiosity about the effect he had on the objects?
 8. Did he express any understanding about how the weight of the object affected the distance and height it flew?
 9. A developmental sequence for motor development parents may observe is:
 - a. *Level 1.* The child is able to balance as he stands on one foot and stomps with his other foot on the launching board. The child is able to aim his foot and hit the board where he wants to with his foot. At this point he is more interested in the action of stomping on the board than sending objects into the air. Allow for repetition and practice while stomping on the board.
 - b. *Level 2.* The child is able to adjust his movements to produce the desired effect. Watch as he adjusts how hard he stomps. The child is able to track and follow objects after they are “launched.” Allow for practice play as the child adjusts the force he uses as he stomps on the board and allow for the fun of chasing the objects and retrieving them.
 - c. *Level 3.* The child is able to track, follow, and attempt to catch. He is able to adjust the force and speed of launching various weights, sizes, and shapes of objects. The child is able to adjust the force needed to cause the object to have the desired height, speed and trajectory.
 10. A development sequence for intellectual development parents may observe is:
 - a. *Level 1.* The child can purposefully explore objects to see what he can do with them. He can predict the effects of his own actions. “When I step on the board I can make the sponge fly up.” He can notice how objects are alike and different. He can describe such differences as “big” and “little,” “on” and “off.”
 - b. *Level 2.* The child is interested in learning about objects by experimenting with them. He will try different actions to produce a desired effect or solve a problem. He may be able to describe differences such as high or low. He may be able to use such terms as in front of, on top of, and behind when describing where the object flew.
 - c. *Level 3.* The child can change his actions in order to solve a problem; for instance, he may move an object to get it to rest on the launch pad or change the position of the launcher to affect the direction the object flies. He can understand the concepts of heavy vs. light. He may use additional words to describe spatial relationships, such as beside and between, near and far, above and below. He is interested in cause and effect and likes to experiment.
- E. **Additional activity.** Use this activity if time remains in the visit.
1. Encourage the child to track, follow, and catch the object that he launches.
 2. Give the child a small ball to launch and see if he can figure out a way to keep it from rolling off the board (propping it up with another object).
 3. Have him try putting more than one object on the board at a time and then adding another. See if he tries to count the objects or to predict what will happen.
 4. Have him search for small objects around the room to launch.

V. Summary

- A. **Key observations.** Restate one or two key observations you have made about the child’s development.
- B. **Parents’ strength.** Point out a strength you observed in the parents.
- C. **Parent follow-up.** Remind parents to continue with the follow-up to the activity(s). Tell parents that you’ll be eager to hear about their experiences with the follow-up activity(s) at your next visit.

The Progression of Gross Motor Skills

Motor development proceeds in a predictable, sequential fashion for basic gross motor skills, but at a child's individual pace. Balance, strength, agility, and flexibility are needed to perform basic gross motor skills. The following is a sequential outline of gross motor skills for children 3-years to kindergarten entry. Where a child is in this sequence depends on many factors including interest, encouragement and opportunity.

Sequence of basic gross motor skills

Running

Running involves a brief period of no contact with the supporting surface.

- First true run; the legs are stiff, the stride is uneven and the arms tend to swing out to the side.
- Stride length is longer; legs extend at takeoff and speed increases. Arms swing vertically. May fall due to experimenting with changing direction and learning to stop quickly.
- Coordinated and refined run; speed of run increases with smooth starting, stopping and changing directions. Arms swing vertically in opposition to the legs to help child maintain balance.

Jumping

Jumping takes three forms: jumping for height, jumping for distance, and jumping from a height.

- One foot takeoff with a landing on both feet.
- Two foot take off with a landing on two feet.
- Jumps for height (up to 1 foot).
- Jumps for distance, beginning with 15-24 inches and progresses to 33 inches.
- Running jump of 28 to 36 inches.
- Jumps down to surface from 12" height, increases with practice.

Hopping

Hopping involves a one-foot takeoff with a landing on the same foot.

- Attempts to hop using an irregular series of jumping and stepping movements.
- Hops up to three times on the preferred foot.
- Hops four to six times on the same foot.
- Hops distance of 16 feet.
- Hops skillfully and rhythmically.

Galloping

Galloping combines a walk and a leap with the same foot leading throughout.

- Basic but inefficient gallop.
- Gallops skillfully on preferred side.

Skipping

Skipping combines a step and a hop in rhythmic alteration.

- Basic but inefficient step-hop pattern on one foot, then the other with a pause in between.
- Alternates step-hop pattern combines into basic skipping pattern.
- Skillful skipping.

Throwing

Throwing involves imparting force to an object toward an intended direction using an overhand, underhand or side-arm pattern. The sequence for an overhand throw is:

- Body faces target, feet remain stationary, ball thrown with forearm extension only.
- Body rotates away from target, steps forward with a leg on same side as the throwing arm.
- Body rotates away from target, full extension of arm behind the body, step forward with leg on opposite side of throwing arm.

Catching

Catching involves receiving force from an object with the hands moving from large to progressively smaller objects.

- Holds arms straight in front of the body, turns face away as object approaches.
- Tracks object, catches object by scooping it with arms and chest.
- Tracks object, catches with arms and hands held together.
- Tracks object, adjusts body position to flight of the object, catches small object with hands cupped together and elbows bent to absorb momentum.

Kicking

Kicking involves imparting force to an object with the foot.

- Flexes lower leg to kick object, the forward swing is short and there is no follow-through.
- Kicking leg is brought backwards, kicking motion stops as ball is contacted, short follow through with kicking leg.
- Kicks through the ball—mature kick.

Children develop the ability to kick a ball in place or stationary before they are able to kick a rolling ball.

Striking

Striking involves imparting force to objects in an over-arm, side-arm, or underarm pattern. Children use striking to hit balls and other objects, often using a racquet or other tool, toward a target or person.

- Faces object and swings downward, feet remain stationary.
- Stands to the side of the object, swings in a horizontal plane.
- Stands to the side, trunk and hip rotate as object is contacted.
- Rotates the trunk and hips in anticipation and shifts body weight forward foot at contact.

References

- Feldman, R. S. (2001). *Child development*. (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gallahue, D. L., & Ozmun, J. C. (1989). *Understanding motor development: Infants, children, adolescents, adults*. (3rd ed.). Madison, WI: WCB Brown & Benchmark.
- Santrock, J. W. (1993). *Children*. (3rd ed.). Madison, WI: WCB Brown & Benchmark.

Gross Motor Development During the Preschool Years

Strong gross motor (large muscle) skills help your preschool age child in several ways. When a young child has good control of her body, she feels confident to explore new ways to move, take risks, and try more complex activities. This confidence and competence allows her to enjoy interacting with other young children as they run, jump, hop, climb, and play tag together. Throwing and aiming objects at targets and catching objects helps to increase eye-hand coordination that is helpful later in writing and reading tasks. Physical activities also provide an outlet for boundless energy and a release for tension and stress. Problem solving skills can be encouraged by challenging your child with questions about movement. For example, how many ways can you move across the room without using your feet?

Gross motor experiences that your child needs:

- Opportunities to throw balls and beanbags harder and farther, in different directions, and at targets of various heights and sizes.
- Challenges to count the number of times she can bounce a ball, jump up and down, or hit a balloon into the air.
- Practice catching balls and beanbags by herself and with a partner.
- Opportunities to balance on different surfaces that are various widths and heights.
- Adults to suggest images to imitate such as animals, vehicles, or machinery (e.g., suggest that your child hop like a bunny, move like a car with a flat tire, or spin like the washing machine).
- Opportunities to throw or roll at a target.
- Opportunities to jump in different directions; over safe objects, down from surfaces that are of safe heights, and up onto sturdy surfaces.

You can help by being aware of the following:

- Activities should be enjoyable.
- Your child should experience success before moving on to more difficult movements.
- Her enthusiasm, not her skill level, is what is most important.
- Opportunities for repeated practice are important.
- If your child is reluctant or has difficulty with a particular skill, encourage her by modeling the skill for her. Show her how to catch a ball or roll it at a target. If you miss, use the opportunity to show her that making a mistake is OK! Don't criticize your child or constantly correct her attempts. She may begin to avoid the activities altogether.

Your Child Young Preschooler

Motor Development



Look for your child to

Catch a large ball.

Jump up with both feet off the floor.

Begin to balance on one foot.

Pedal a tricycle.

Ways you can help

Provide an assortment of different sized balls. Play catch with your child using a large ball then gradually use a smaller ball. When you practice, remind him to look at the ball and not your face.

Hold your child's hands, show him how to bend his knees, and then jump up together. Later he can try to jump up by himself.

After your child can jump up, use masking tape to make shapes on the floor for him to jump into and over.

Play a game with your child to see who can stand on one leg the longest.

Put a long piece of string on the floor. Have your child walk on it.

Encourage your child to push a riding toy or tricycle with his feet on the ground. Next, have your child put his feet on the pedals and you push him along so he can feel what it is like to pedal. Give him many opportunities to practice riding. Attach blocks to the pedals if your child's legs are too short.

Look for your child to

Walk up and down stairs alternating feet, and without holding on.

Use the muscles in his hands better to create and construct.

Draw straight lines and copy a circle.

Make more purposeful strokes to draw using an adult-like grasp on a crayon.

Begin to use scissors.

String and lace objects.

Ways you can help

Allow your child to practice going up and down 2 to 3 steps at a time by himself. Be close by until you are confident that he is coordinated enough to do it by himself.

Give your child play dough or clay to help strengthen the muscles in his hands. Show him how to squeeze, poke, and roll the play dough to make snakes and balls. Use cookie cutters and assorted kitchen items to make interesting shapes and patterns.

Provide your child with wooden blocks so he can practice building towers and making buildings.

Show your child how to make straight lines and circles on paper. Encourage him to try.

Spend time drawing with your child using a pencil, crayons, chalk, or finger paints. Show him how to make a face. Point out the eyes, nose, and mouth. Let him have a turn.

Have your child cut play dough with safety scissors. Next, provide paper so he can snip the edges of the paper. Later on, you can draw a straight line on paper and ask him to cut on the line.

Show your child how to thread a shoelace (knotted at one end) through large beads or pasta. Encourage him to try.

Punch holes along the edge of old greeting cards or cereal box fronts. Have your child lace yarn or a shoelace in and out of the holes.

***Your Child
3 Years
Motor
Development***



Look for your child to

Gross Motor (big muscles)

Catch a large, bounced ball.

Balance on one foot for five seconds.

Walk down stairs, alternating feet, and not holding on to a wall or railing.

March, in time to music.

Jump forward, landing with her feet together.

Ride a tricycle.

Fine Motor (small muscles)

Make a bridge with three blocks.

Ways you can help

Always have a large, lightweight ball available for your child. Play catch with her often.

Play a slow-motion game of *Freeze*. Move slowly, and let your child tell you when to *freeze* (hold the position) and when to *melt* (continue moving). Take turns.

If your home doesn't have stairs, take your child to places that do. Give her time to practice, and as much support as she needs.

Enjoy moving to a variety of music. Sing, play the radio, borrow tapes and CDs from the library.

Play "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick. Jack jump *over* the candlestick."

Make sure the tricycle 'fits' your child. Her feet should reach the pedals at all points, and her hands should reach the handlebars when she is seated.

Encourage your child to build with a variety of materials: boxes, cans, paper towel tubes, sticks, rocks. Talk about the different structures: bridges, towers, tunnels, roads.

Look for your child to

Fine Motor (small muscles)

Build a tower of more than nine blocks, without help.

Use scissors to cut along a line.

Fold paper, making the edges almost even.

Draw a O and a +.

Draw a person with 2-4 body parts.

Pour water into various containers.

Ways you can help

Include a set of blocks among your child's playthings.

Take turns adding on blocks, building as high as you can.

Frequently let your child use blunt-tipped scissors, under your supervision. Show her how to hold them. If she gets frustrated, let her stop, and return to it when she is ready.

Give her lots of opportunity to play with play dough. This strengthens her hands.

Help your child draw straight or curved lines (6 inches) to cut along.

Let your child help you fold towels and washcloths. Help her feel proud when she gets the edges even.

Show her how to fold paper in half to make a simple book. Suggest that she can draw pictures and you will write down the 'story' she tells about them.

Make sure your child knows how to hold a crayon with an "adult" grip: with thumb on one side, and fingers on the other.

Give her lots of time to use drawing materials and unlined paper.

Encourage her to draw members of the family, and to tell you about the drawings.

Give her containers to play with in the bathtub and at the kitchen sink.

Stress:

What it is and What to do About it

Stress is in everybody's life. There are good stressors and bad stressors, but both have an effect on people. Consider a marriage, or the birth of a baby, and then think about a car accident or house fire. These things have very different meanings to us, but all require that some change or adjustment be made. This is where stress comes from—the need to make changes in how we are coping or in our lifestyles.

Learning to cope with stress is something we all must do. The difference between children and adults, of course, is that children do not have experience or practice in dealing with stress. They have not learned how to cope like adults have. Part of the job of being a parent is to learn to monitor how much stress your child is exposed to, to determine when she has too much, and to help her manage what stress there is. If you can give her skills, then she will not be overwhelmed by the stress. When children are overwhelmed by stress - it becomes **distress**, and problems result.

Causes of stress in children

While stress is a part of life, certain things cause more stress than others. For children, transitions or *developmental changes* can be sources. The following list gives some examples of these kinds of stressors:

- Giving up a bottle or breast
- Letting go of a pacifier or security object
- Moving into a “big” bed
- Adjusting to the birth of a sibling
- Starting preschool
- Toilet learning
- Increase in number of expected independent self-help skills
- Separation from parents

Another category of events that can cause stress in children is *life changes*. This includes things that happen around your child or in your child's world:

- Marital separation or divorce
- Family relocation or move
- Death of a family member
- Addition of a stepparent or stepsiblings
- Chronic emotional or physical illness in a family member
- Prolonged separation from parent or sibling

A third category of stressors for children includes *environmental stressors*. Children may respond very differently to these events, but stress reactions are not unusual.

- Holidays
- Vacations
- Storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods
- War or terrorist attacks
- Physical abuse or neglect
- Dog bites
- Insect stings
- Fires
- Car accidents
- Accidents

Things that happen to your child's body also can create a stressful situation for her. These may be called *physical stressors* and include:

- Prolonged physical illness
- Sudden physical illness
- Surgery
- Burns
- Injuries
- Broken bones
- Nutritional or eating problems
- Obesity

Poor weight gain
Puberty
Allergies
Physical handicap

The variety of stressors affecting children is striking, and sometimes we fail to pay attention to *how many* are happening in the life of the child at a given time. It is important to understand that when a number of types of stressors occur at the same time, the risk is much higher for the child to be overwhelmed and to become *distressed*. It is important to control these events wherever possible.

For example, if the family is facing a move, it is not the time to ask a child to give up a pacifier. Do not start toilet training just before a new baby is due, and avoid announcing a marital separation just before a child begins kindergarten. Generally, the rule of thumb is to always allow 6 weeks after any major change or stressor before introducing a new change, if at all possible.

Of course, parents cannot control many stressful events. This is why including destressing events in your family's daily life is important, as is helping children know what to do when they feel stressed.

How do I know if my child is stressed?

Signs of stress in children may include any of the following behaviors. All of these may appear, at times, in children and be perfectly normal. If there are several signs present at one time or if they last a long time, it may be a signal that your child is stressed.

Excessive crabbiness
Changes in eating and sleeping habits
Regression to earlier behaviors
Withdrawal or looking sad
Extreme fear
Nervousness
Uncontrolled crying
Changes in bathroom habits
Tics

Physical complaints—headaches, stomach-aches, pain with no medical cause
Frequent worry
Concerns about not being loved or cared about

What do I do to help my child with stress?

The major goal is to get your child to *relax* and to have *coping skills* available to use when she needs them.

- Teach your child what it feels like to have tight muscles and fast breathing.
- Teach relaxation and deep breathing exercises. You might put on a relaxing CD, and lie on the floor practicing being relaxed.
- Watch the clouds or sky, and think about floating up to the sky as light as a feather.
- Practice being a tight, marching soldier and then a droopy rag doll.
- Use play dough, finger paints or other artwork to let feelings out and show the difference between relaxation and tension.
- Listen to what the child has to say.
- Talk about your feelings and what you see going on in the family.
- Teach “feeling words” for the stress that is around you. Help your child to express what she senses so she is comfortable sharing ideas with you.
- Show positive words, attitudes, and acceptance. Avoid too much pressure, competition, and evaluation of your child at home.
- Slow down. Stay home. Let your child have plenty of unscheduled time to do what she wants.
- Serve healthy comfort foods. Avoid refined sugar, caffeine, and highly processed foods.
- Make sure your child has plenty of sleep—8:00 p.m. is a great bedtime.
- Spend time outside breathing fresh air and getting exercise.
- Avoid too much media exposure and too much time sitting and watching. Encourage creativity and play.
- Keep routines and rituals in the family, especially at stressful times. Children find comfort in things being the same.

Can stress hurt my child?

Exposure to normal levels of stress or short-term stress does not usually have a lasting effect on children. However, long-term, continuous, and frequent stress can create symptoms in children. If children have no adults in their lives to rely on, nor with whom to communicate their concerns, stress can become overwhelming **distress** for them. Another negative effect comes when children are not learning coping skills or ways to manage the stress they feel, and they sense that they are powerless. Again, this can create emotional, physical, or psychological problems for a child who is left to manage on her own.

Can adults give children their stress?

Remember that children are very sensitive to their environment. If the environment is highly-charged, even young babies and toddlers will be affected. Children also imitate the adults closest to them; if they think being stressed is a way of life, they will adopt those behaviors. Children also will take on the coping methods of the people around them, so if you are yelling and crabby in response to stress, you can expect your child to do the same.

What if I cannot do anything about the stress?

There is always something you can do. You may not be able to get rid of a particular stressor or to avoid stress, but you can be with your child, listen to her concerns, and talk about what stress is and how it feels. You can offer ideas about how to relax. A strong, positive relationship with a caring adult is one of the key protective shields we can give children for combating the stress in their lives.