



Parenting the Preschooler

Social Competence & Emotional Well-Being Fact Sheets

How does your preschooler show stress?

Ages & Stages

PRESCHOOLER A child who is 3 to 5 years of age.

YOUNG CHILD A child who is 0 to 8 years of age.

Minding Our Language

Families come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A “family” may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. “Parents” may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words “family” and “parent” in these materials, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.

It may be hard to think of young children as being stressed. But preschoolers are going through a lot of changes as they work to become more independent. They also have not mastered understanding and handling their feelings, which may include stress.

Every preschooler reacts differently to stress. In general, when children are stressed, they will change some part of their normal behavior. They may be more emotional, show new or changed behaviors (like becoming withdrawn or clingy), or resume behaviors they did when they were younger (like thumb-sucking or wetting the bed). Some common signs of stress in children are complaining of feeling sick, experiencing mood swings, and having trouble sleeping.

Try some of the following techniques to help your preschooler learn to deal with stress:

- Create a low-stress environment, which means doing things like:
- Supporting and encouraging them.
- Listening to and talking with them often.
- Setting appropriate limits on screen time.
- Providing a quiet place they can go to feel calm.
- Ensuring they eat a balanced diet and are physically active at least 60 minutes each day.
- Making sure they sleep 10 to 12 hours a day.
- Model healthy ways of coping with stressful situations yourself. Chances are your child will learn to cope with stress by watching how you do it.
- Limit your child’s outside activities so they aren’t too busy. One or two activities each week is enough at this age, especially if they go to preschool or child care.
- Let your child know in advance about any changes in their schedule. Help them prepare by talking about what to expect and when.
- Help them identify what causes them stress and talk with them about ways to limit it.
- Identify the things or activities that calm or soothe your child. Ideas to try are having a special toy, listening to calm music, being sung to, or reading in a quiet place. Keep trying until you find what works for your child!
- Set aside time every day when the two of you can talk. Ask open-ended questions that begin with “how” or “what” to encourage your child to give more than yes or no answers.

- Acknowledge their feelings. Let your child know that all of their feelings are okay and begin teaching them ways to cope with feelings that upset them.
- Talk about feelings often so they are able to learn the words they need to express themselves.
- Give your child other opportunities to work out feelings. They may express themselves better through nonverbal means, such as playing with dolls or action figures, playing games, or drawing.
- If your child's behavior concerns you, consider talking with your family health care provider or your local health department.

Find Out More

MSU Extension provides the following resources for parents and caregivers of preschoolers and young children at no or low cost. Be sure to check out these and other MSU Extension resources available at www.extension.msu.edu.

Extension Extras (<https://bit.ly/2LC2vdX>) – These compilations of news articles, activities, parenting tips and advice are published online Monday through Friday. The resources are designed for parents and caregivers of young children who are home all day during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Each day has a theme: Mindful Mondays, Tips on Tuesday, Working Wednesdays, Thinking Thursday, and Fun Fridays.

Extension Extras Enrichment Kits (<https://bit.ly/35QApIQ>) – These kits feature five or six early childhood activities with learning goals focused in areas such as social and emotional health, literacy, and STEM; a supply list; suggested children's books; introduction letters explaining how to use the materials; and an evaluation. The kits are available as free downloads.

Early Childhood Videos (<https://bit.ly/3ioyEkS>) – These short videos offer parents and caregivers of young children information on parenting topics. Titles include "Perspective Taking," "Family Movies," "Goals of Misbehavior," "Using Thinking and Feeling Words," "The Waiting Game," and "When Siblings Fight."

Building Early Emotional Skills (BEES) in Young Children (<https://bit.ly/38XW4KI>) – This page provides links to a variety of free online parenting courses, workshops, and events offered by MSU Extension for parents and caregivers of young children aged 0 to 3.

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