

## THE EFFECTS OF FAMILY STRESS ON INFANTS AND TODDLERS



Infants and toddlers are highly affected by family stress and chaos in their environment. By understanding how and why, you can help protect your baby or toddler from the negative effects of family stress.

Why and how does stress affect young children?

- **Because babies and toddlers are sensitive to your feelings** and are learning from you how to respond to different situations and how to regulate feelings. When you are scared, anxious, stressed or angry, your baby will feel your feelings and it can be confusing.
- **You can help** protect your baby or toddler by spending a little time everyday, getting down on the floor and seeing the world through their eyes. Enjoy some playtime with your little one, let go of your worries, distractions (like cell phones and computers) and give your child all of your attention.
- **Because you may be distracted and less available to them.** Babies and toddlers tell you what they need or what they feel by crying, clinging, using body language, etc. If you are distracted and do not respond in a reliable and predictable manner, they lose trust and confidence that you will be there for them and either become more persistent or give up and no longer trust you.
- **You can help** protect your baby or toddler by trying to figure out what they want or need and respond to them as soon as possible. Infants are learning to trust. They may have a difficult time trusting if the environment is scary or harsh or unpredictable and you are not available to buffer the effects with a strong, protective relationship. They can learn to trust again, if they are able to get their needs met by you.
- **Because stress causes chemical changes in the brain and interrupts learning.** Babies and toddlers can become “hypervigilant” when scary things happen around them. That means they have a hard time focusing on learning and are “jumpy” at loud sounds or new people. They may be preoccupied with making sure you are near them at all times or try to keep track of everyone around them.
- **You can help** protect your baby or toddler by making sure that home is a safe place and by providing them with comforting routines. Make bedtimes, eating times and naps the same time each day, then they don’t have to worry about the next meal or that going to bed is a bad thing. Do a “bedtime routine”, sing the same song every time you clean up toys, have a comfort object like a blanket or stuffed animal that they can have when sad or scared.

Your child is depending on you to buffer their stress and make sure the environment is safe for them. Wired for survival, children will put as much of their attention and energy as is needed into managing environmental stress. If they cannot count on you, they cannot count on any adult and the world is a scary and dangerous place. This experience of danger can last until long after the danger is gone.

Providing these important protective elements when they are young helps children to grown strong and smart because they do not have to worry about safety. Children can learn that adults will help them when they are scared or upset, will protect them from harm and will listen to them when they need attention.

Parenting is hard work and may become overwhelming for the most dedicated and skilled parents. Asking for help can be the wisest choice a parent can make in managing stressful times. Contact us at Northern Pines and let us know how we can help. [pfore@npmh.org](mailto:pfore@npmh.org)