

Parenting a child who has experienced a lot of stress can be a difficult task. Babies and toddlers often can't tell us how they feel. One way they cope with stress is through behaviors. Learning to see the signs of stress and respond to them in a positive way helps very young children feel safe and cared for.

Symptom	Explanation
Hypervigilance and Frequent Startling	A baby who is tense, watchful, or on guard even when in a familiar, comfortable, and safe environment is hypervigilant. Often hypervigilance is accompanied by visible startling at sudden noises or sounds.
Attachment and Response to Caregiving	Babies naturally develop attachment relationships with their caregivers. A healthy attachment is one where the child can use the caregiver as a “secure base” and feels safe taking small risks when they are near. Sometimes children are overly clingy with caregivers and sometimes they avoid interaction with caregivers. These are signs of problems in the caregiver-child relationship. 
Emotional Distress 	Infants and toddlers who have been in stressful or scary situations often have difficulty controlling their emotions and act impulsively. They may have more intense emotional reactions or become very angry or sad without an obvious cause. When this distress is related to stressful events, they may be less responsive to their caregiver’s attempts to calm them.
Feeding Problems	Babies and toddlers who have experienced stressful events may have problems with eating, either refusing to eat or wanting a bottle again even though they have begun eating solid food.
Sleep Disturbance, Nightmares	After stressful experiences, babies and toddlers may sometimes be afraid to be left alone in a room or resist falling asleep. Sometimes they may have nightmares or “night terrors.” It’s hard to know if an empty stomach, a wet diaper, or illness caused a baby to start crying in the middle of the night. But if you rarely find a physical reason for the baby to wake screaming, the behavior could be related to stress.
Repetitive/ Constricted Play	 Toddlers normally repeat play behaviors, like stacking blocks, and linking pop-beads. But, when a toddler repeatedly acts out scary or stressful events, this may be a sign that the event is continuing to impact them. Also, when toddlers show little interest in new toys or in other children, it may be a sign of depression and anxiety.
Developmental Concerns	Toddlers who have experienced stressful events for a long time may show some developmental deficits, including poor verbal skills and/or memory problems.

