



**What are the
signs of
competitive
stress? ▶**

Some children are more naturally prone to anxiety and stress than others. The term ‘trait anxiety’ has been developed to describe these individuals. Children high in trait anxiety tend to view the world as more threatening than do children with low trait anxiety. Such children, often described by their parents as ‘worriers’, may find competitive sport more stressful than do others. Children with poor self-confidence and low self-worth, who feel they have little control over situations, may also experience more stress.

Parents and coaches can watch for signs that identify children who are particularly prone to stress and who may not be coping well with pressure. Stress can range from ‘butterflies in the stomach’, to extreme fear and panic, to avoidance of a competition or performance altogether. Loss of concentration, worry, rapid heart rate, nausea, stomach ache, fidgeting, restlessness, and fatigue are all signs of stress.³

Stress also causes muscle tension. Prolonged muscle tension leads to pain, stiffness, and fatigue. Children who are under stress will tire more easily, find it more difficult to make decisions, become forgetful, and lose concentration.

Other common signs and symptoms associated with childhood anxiety are

- loss of sleep, early waking, or any change in sleep patterns
- nightmares or bad dreams
- any change in dietary habits such as loss of appetite
- mood changes such as irritability or aggression
- manipulateness — the child may become very controlling of situations
- restlessness or fidgeting
- hypochondriasis — the child may complain of physical symptoms on the day of the competition
- frequent urination or diarrhea.⁴

To gauge the level of stress, find out how the child feels before a competition. Parents can ask a child if he or she feels uptight or queasy or is worrying about making a mistake. Giving lots of positive reinforcement each time a child participates in a competition or performs a sport skill will avoid placing an undue emphasis on mistakes.