

Stress is a normal, unavoidable part of life. It affects everyone, even children. A preschooler is stressed when day-care arrangements are changed. A school-age child is upset when he doesn't do well on an arithmetic test. A pre-teen worries about her changing body. And a teenager feels stress as she tries to figure out what she is going to do with her life.

Parents can ease the stress that children feel and teach them to cope with stressful situations. It is important to remember that stress is a natural part of your child's life. It only becomes harmful when the problems and hassles of daily life overwhelm your child.

This publication is divided into sections that apply to preschool, school-age and teenage children. Each section gives common causes of stress and provides information that will help you with your child. Your help is vital. Children who are emotionally isolated, who do not get the support of adults, and who do not have confidence in themselves are the children who do not handle stress well.

Children of all ages feel stressed when a new baby arrives, the family moves, a divorce or remarriage occurs or when the family is under financial pressures. When you are under stress yourself, be sure to take the time to explain the situation to your children. A child who doesn't understand a situation often imagines the worst.

Remember that your child is learning from you. Parents who are high-strung, perfectionists, or poor problem solvers are apt to pass these traits on to their children because kids copy their parents' behaviour.

Finally, too much stress can be harmful. You need to recognize the signs of excessive stress so that you can get help for your child. Seeking help may be as simple as talking the situation over with a friend, family member, or minister. Someone who is familiar with your family's situation may be able to give some objective, useful advice. If the situation is extreme, you may need to talk with your family physician, a psychologist, school guidance counsellor, or another professional.

### **Helping Your Teenager**

Many of the stresses teens experience are related to growing up. They worry about their changing body, struggle with sexuality and search for their identity. Teenagers can talk about their problems and should have developed problem-solving skills. However, because of the emotional upheaval and their uncertainty about important decisions, they need special help and support from adults.

During early adolescence, teens are very sensitive to criticism. Even well-meant advice can seem like criticism and trigger an angry or defence response. Self-esteem is generally low. Common stresses include: taking

tests, pressure to make good grades, pressure to experiment with sex and drugs, problems in boy/girl relationships, concerns about fairness, right and wrong, nervousness about speeches and competition, uncertainty about personal appearance, pressure from too many activities, caring for younger brothers and sisters, not enough time, and lack of self-confidence.

How can you tell if your teenager is under too much stress? Look for eating or weight problems, excessive daydreaming, drug abuse or nervous tics like unusual eye-blinking, nail biting, and muscle twitching. Emotional stresses can lead to talk about suicide, delinquency, perfectionist behaviour, isolation, and failure in school. Neglecting personal appearance, increased irritability and exhaustion are other signs of stress. Often teens respond to stress by withdrawing, not communicating, becoming rebellious, and getting into trouble.

What can you do to help? Teenagers need to find constructive ways to deal with stressful situations. As your teenager learns that he can deal with problems, he gains a positive attitude about himself. Offer honest praise when he does a good job on something. Remember to say thank you. Teenagers often feel unappreciated.

Consider your child's schedule. Is he over-extending himself? Some teenagers find themselves swamped when they add an after-school job to an already full day. Is he expected to do too much at home? Although teenagers should be doing regular chores, some do become overburdened with them. Teenagers are still children, and they need time to relax and play.

Perhaps the most effective way to help your teenager manage his stress is to keep the lines of communication open. He may not want or need your advice, but he will appreciate your attention. Most teenagers like adults to just listen to them. They want someone to hear what they have to say. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't express your opinions, particularly on important matters like values. But if every discussion turns into an argument, you may need to spend more time listening, and to express your opinions calmly and quietly.

Encourage your child to get physical. Teens can work off some of their stresses in aerobics, cycling, skating, or jogging. This is a very constructive way of dealing with stress. Other positive approaches include learning to be assertive, to control anger, and to say "no."

When should you seek help? Adolescence is a difficult time for teens and their families. When pressures become extreme and when solutions run out, it's time to talk about getting help. When you see evidence that your child is using drugs or when your teen talks about suicide or begins giving away treasured items, get professional help immediately. Watch for warning signs

of depression, risky sexual practices, unusual antisocial behaviour, and personality changes.

### **Summary**

Children cannot escape the stress and the pressures that come with living in today's society. But they can learn ways to cope. As a parent, you can help your child in a number of ways:

Teach your child to solve problems. He needs to learn to identify the problem, possible solutions, pros and cons of possible solutions, and then to select the best choice.

Talk with your child. Set aside a special time to talk. Find out what's happening in his life. Be honest and open with him. Tell children about the family's goals and discuss difficulties, without burdening them with your problems. Compliment children when they do well, and don't forget hugs and kisses.

Make sure your child has periods of quiet time so that he can relax. Teach him that exercise--playing ball, skating, swimming, running, walking, riding a bike--is also relaxing.

Be supportive. Mutual respect and shared values help during periods of stress. Your child needs to let off steam. He will also benefit by seeing how you cope successfully with stress.

### **Parenting Tips**

Teach your child to identify stressful situations. He should talk about them or write them down. Teach him to transfer coping strategies to other situations.

Role play a stressful situation with your child. Help him to figure out a constructive way to deal with stress.

Use humour to buffer bad feelings and situations. A child who learns to use humour himself will be better able to keep things in perspective.

Don't overload your child with too many after-school activities and responsibilities.

Help children learn to pace themselves. Don't enrol them in every class that comes along, and don't expect them to be first in everything.

When you are under extra stress, check to be sure that you are not passing

it along to your child.

Set a good example. Demonstrate self-control and coping skills. Encourage cooperation rather than competition.

Get professional help when problems seem beyond your skills.

## • What Parents Need to Know

By Amye Walters  
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Experts encourage parents to halt what has become a maddening trend and begin teaching children about what's really important: values, hard work, delayed gratification, honesty and compassion. But with extended work hours, dual-income families and disposable income (buying power), many parents find it difficult to deny children the material possessions they covet.

Many children use the everyone-has-one argument. When parents investigate and learn classmates already have the object of desire, they are more likely to cave in and head to the store. To combat this problem, parents in Boulder, Colo., founded the Parent Engagement Network+ (PEN+), a support group created to bring the community together via interactive gatherings addressing a variety of parenting issues. Among the issues: enforcing rules and limits to ensure that "keeping up with the Joneses" doesn't get out of hand.

Unlike past generations, today few parents ask children to complete household chores. Many feel their child is already overburdened with social and academic pressures. They feel it is cruel to add lawn care, laundry, scouring and scrubbing to a lengthy to-do list. However, consider the following:

- As a parent, it is important to separate permissiveness and love. Experts say that too much love won't spoil a child, but too few limits can.
- Unlike adults, children need behavioral limits.
- Limitations show a child he/she lives within a structured environment, and this gives the child a sense of security.
- Children learn self-control by watching how others, especially parents, behave.
- Teach children that treats are reserved for special occasions.
- When implementing a plan of control, be sure to remind doting grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles and others that their participation and restraint is essential for the success of the plan and the future of the child.

## are you feeling stressed?

Stress isn't always a bad thing. It can make your body produce adrenaline, the 'fight or flight' hormone which gives you that little extra bit of drive to overcome nerves and do really well in a situation.

But long term, stress can be bad news.

If you are dealing with a long-term stress, whether it is bullying or some kind of family problem, your body will react physically to the pressure of having high levels of stress-related hormones in your system.

Find out more about how our bodies react under pressure in our feature [what is stress?](#)

If you are worried you may be getting stressed, or worried about a friend, watch out for warning signs like these:

- irritability
- difficulties sleeping
- going off your food
- becoming quiet and withdrawn
- feeling tired all the time
- stomach aches or headaches
- finding it hard to concentrate on school work
- having difficulty solving problems you usually find easy.

## young people coping with stress

It may feel like there is nothing you can do when you are feeling stressed to make yourself feel better. But there is.

Here are a few tips from some experts. Give them a try.

### beating stress

- Think of your stress as a puzzle to be solved. Work out what situations make you feel stressed (exams, going to a party, meeting a new person) and how you behave.
- Think of different ways you could behave in that situation, so you would feel more in control.
- Imagine how other people might behave if you acted differently. If you seem nervous, for example, they might get nervous too; if you smile, they will probably smile back.
- Try rehearsing different ways of behaving – act it out loud with a friend.

- You might get it wrong when you try it for real, but not everyone is right first time. Try it again, next time.
- If things are getting on top of you, try to find someone to talk to. It might be your parents, an aunt or uncle, a close friend, a teacher or the school nurse. If you go to church, temple, or another place of worship, you could speak to someone there.
- If you are having difficulty sleeping or feel tearful and depressed, you could see your family doctor or practice nurse. They can put you in touch with specialists who are trained to deal with young people's problems.

## **exam stress**

- Try to plan your revision time by drawing up a timetable. Build in time for the things you enjoy – like watching your favourite TV programme, going out with your friends, or going to play football in the park.
- Don't leave your revision to the last minute – cramming will only make you more stressed out.
- Work out the best time for you to revise – some people are more alert in the morning; others study better later in the day.
- Study in short bursts, rather than long sessions.
- Give yourself a few treats – pamper yourself with a long hot bath, or listen to your favourite CD for an hour after you have finished your revision.

There are more tips about managing stress during revision and exams in our [coping with exams](#) feature.

## **family relationships**

- Try to talk to your parents about how you feel. Don't let them pass the buck to you about choosing which of them you want to live with.
- Talk to as many people as possible about what is going on, especially your friends. Don't bottle it up.

## **abusive situations**

- If you are being bullied or abused physically or sexually, try to tell an adult – such as your parents or a teacher you trust.
- You may decide to tell a friend at first. If you do that, you should still try to work out how you are going to tell an adult.
- If you really don't feel able to tell anyone yet, then keep a diary. You might find it a therapeutic way of expressing how you feel. It will also be useful as a record should you ever take the matter further.

## **life experiences**

### **we've been there**

Leigh, 16, has just decided to leave sixth form college because he found the work difficult.

'The biggest stress for me was getting a lot of course work all at the same time, with the deadlines close together. I've decided to get a job and do the courses in computing part-time at my own pace.'

Leigh, who lives with his mum and grandparents, finds studying hard. 'You go downstairs and they have got the telly on really loud. You can't get much peace and quiet, especially when you are trying to study.'

He's a firm believer in telling someone if you are stressed out by something. 'Go and see the teachers if you've got problems,' he says. 'I know everyone says it, but not many people do it. I did it once when I didn't understand something and ever since I always talk to them.'

Michelle, also 16, has just started sixth form college after doing well in her GCSEs.

'I got really stressed out waiting for my results. It was quite scary on the morning, having to wait for them to be posted up at the school. I couldn't eat any breakfast, although I did at least sleep the night before. I was quite frightened about starting a new school. I found it difficult to start making conversation, but you just had to work at it. It's weird at the moment. The courses are not what I expected. It was so easy at school but now it is so much harder. I've got assignments to do and I panic, especially when I don't understand what I am supposed to do. But once when that happened, I asked the teacher, who helped to explain it to me. Then I was alright.'

Daavid, nine, feels a bit stressed when he goes to the doctor's.

'I just get a bit worried when I'm sitting in the chair in the waiting room. But I just go ahead with it and get it over with.' His friend Harry does have problems though. 'Sometimes people are horrible to him and he really freaks out and starts punching them. He doesn't do it on purpose. Afterwards, he just can't believe what he has done.'

Sarah, 16, has had problems at home recently.

'I had a bit of trouble with my dad. He was moaning at me because he said I wasn't doing enough around the house. He went really mad, threatening the house wasn't big enough for both of us. I was really upset, but decided I had to talk to him more and tell him what was going on in my life. I used to just talk to my mum and I think he felt left out.'

Here are ten signs of burnout that you should be on the lookout for:

1. Your teenager is acting depressed. He doesn't want to do anything, he has lost interest in things he likes to do, and he has decrease attention or effectiveness when doing things.
2. Your teenager is feeling some anxiety for no known reason or he acting is over anxious. He has the inability to relax, is not sleeping well, having nightmares, restless, etc.
3. Your teenager is suffering from insomnia.
4. Your teenager is either overeating or under eating, as both are a response to being stressed.
5. Your teenager is giving in to impulse behavior, more than normal, and is showing signs of emotional instability, more than normal.
6. Your teenager is experiencing neck or back pain.
7. Your teenage daughter is missing menstrual cycles.
8. Your teenager is complaining of stomachache, dizziness, dryness of throat and mouth.
9. Your teenager is acting 'keyed up', has emotional tension and alertness, and high-pitched voice or nervous laughter.
10. Increased risk taking behavior can be a sign of burnout. For example: smoking, drinking alcohol, experimenting with sex or drugs sometimes point to underlying problems such as burnout.

## 10 ways to help your child manage stress

by [Charlene Giannetti](#) and [Margaret Sagarese](#)

**Children feel just as overloaded with responsibilities - and therefore stress - as adults do. Teach them how to handle the tough times with these practical techniques.**

To learn to deal with stress, a child needs to develop an inner watchdog that can recognise when emotions, duties and responsibilities could or are beginning to feel overwhelming. These ten techniques will help them know when they are stressed and what attitudes, behaviours and insights are good coping strategies:

1. **Identify symptoms of anxiety** Take inventory of your inner voice when it repeatedly announces, 'I'm worried about?'. Whether it's that imminent maths test, party or football game, make a note of the silent alarm bell in your head. Catch yourself, and pay attention to nervous habits like hair twirling, nail biting, eye twitching and foot tapping.
2. **Ask for help** You don't have to handle everything on your own. Look for a helping hand. Or you can delegate a portion of a task that is overwhelming. Even the act of venting to someone about all the stress you feel will help you find emotional support and nurturing.
3. **Create an action plan to handle a forthcoming worrying challenge** Divide the task up into parts you can manage. A one-step-at-a-time approach divides and conquers anxiety.
4. **Identify activities that relax you** Listening to music, going for a walk, calling a friend - those are healthy diversion techniques. Take note of the things that bring you pleasure and exercise them when you need a lift or distraction.
5. **Analyse how you explain failure** Do you blame yourself? Laying blame and taking responsibility are two different things. Pessimists blame themselves; optimists don't. Don't say, 'I failed the test because I am stupid or incompetent.' Do say, 'I failed because the test covered material I didn't focus on when studying.' In the latter situation, you are in control of changing the situation for the better. Realise that you can plan more effectively for similar challenges in the future. Beating yourself up is self-defeating; it leaves you feeling powerless when, in fact, you are not.
6. **Get enough sleep and eat properly during tough times** When your schedule is packed with events, chores, challenges and responsibilities, make sure you take care of your basic needs first. If you become overtired or undernourished your body is less capable of performing well under pressure.
7. **Purge yourself of intense emotions** Keeping a journal is a helpful way to express your anger, sadness or disappointment. When you write it down, you are, in effect, transferring the emotion out of your body and onto paper. This process helps you understand what's behind the emotions, too.
8. **Draw boundaries for yourself, within reason** Can I land the lead part in the play? Can I make it into the netball team? Is that possible or impossible? Reach high with your expectations, but just short of setting unattainable goals.
9. **Set priorities** There are times when the whole world seems like a 'to do' list. Do the washing-up. Finish that homework. Study for the test. Read the book for a project. Practise that musical instrument. Run so you are fit for the match. Do some volunteer work. Shop for shoes for the school disco. Learn to decide what is most important, and focus on that first. Arrange your 'to do' list in order of importance. Sometimes it's best to put off till tomorrow so you can manage today.
10. **Get physical** Exercise revs up your body and makes you feel more hopeful and energised. No matter how much is on your plate, find time to get outside and walk, run, cycle, skate, swim, play tennis or partake in whatever physical activity delights you.

# School Stress

What are your memories of your school days? Do you remember school as fun, boring, exciting, a time to be with friends? Some children experience a great deal of stress associated with school.

**What would you say might be some things that trigger school stress?**

*Possible answers*

- being bullied
- having work incomplete or turning work in late
- not knowing the answer
- being slow in sports
- not having fashionable clothes (having out-of-date clothes)
- losing papers and books
- having inadequate school supplies

**What are some of the symptoms of stress in children?**

*Possible answers*

- irritability
- depression
- impulsive behavior
- fear, anxiety, worry
- sleep problems
- nervousness
- headaches

**How can we help children deal with and overcome school related stress?**

*Possible answers*

- have realistic expectations for the child
- teach them some simple relaxation techniques
- help them identify their learning style and ways to learn information
- provide nutritious meals
- get plenty of sleep
- cut down on chaos at home--where's my shoe, my book bag, etc.
- don't over commit the child with too many extra activities
- manage time wisely
- spend time having fun
- prepare for tests and discussions
- be available to listen to the child

## Your Personal Stress Scale

In the following table you can look up representative changes in your life and see how much stress value each of these changes is adding to your life. **Check any item you may have experienced in the last 12 months.** If you have a javascript enabled browser, your score will automatically be added up. (Adapted from the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. This scale was first published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Copyright 1967, vol.II, p. 214. It is used by permission of Pergamon Press Ltd.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Death of spouse	100
<input type="checkbox"/>	Menopause	60
<input type="checkbox"/>	Divorce	60
<input type="checkbox"/>	Separation from living partner	60
<input type="checkbox"/>	Jail term or probation	60
<input type="checkbox"/>	Death of close family member other than spouse	60
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal injury or illness	45
<input type="checkbox"/>	Marriage or establishing life partnership	45
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fired at work	45
<input type="checkbox"/>	Marital or relationship reconciliation	40
<input type="checkbox"/>	Retirement	40
<input type="checkbox"/>	Change in health of immediate family member	40
<input type="checkbox"/>	Work more than 40 hours per week	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Becoming pregnant or causing pregnancy	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sex difficulties	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gain of new family member	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business or work role change	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Change in financial status	35
<input type="checkbox"/>	Death of a close friend	30
<input type="checkbox"/>	Change to different line of work	30
<input type="checkbox"/>	Change in number of arguments with mate	30
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mortgage or loan for major purchase (home, etc.)	25
<input type="checkbox"/>	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	25
<input type="checkbox"/>	Son or daughter leaves	25
<input type="checkbox"/>	Trouble with in-laws	25
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sleep less than 8 hours per night	25
<input type="checkbox"/>	Outstanding personal achievement	25

I have asked you to look at the **last twelve months of changes** in your life. This may surprise you. It is crucial, however, that a major change in your life has effects that carry over for long periods of time. It is like dropping a stone into a pond. After the initial splash, you will experience ripples of stress. And these ripples may continue in your life for years. So, if you have experienced total stress within the last twelve months of 250 or greater, even with normal stress tolerance, you may be over-stressed. Persons with low stress tolerance may be over-stressed at levels as low as 100.

## Stress Scale For Youth

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**Instructions:** In the following table you can look up representative changes in your life and see how much stress value each of these changes is adding to your life. NOTE ANY ITEM THAT YOU MAY HAVE EXPERIENCE IN THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS. Then, note your total score.

STRESS	EVENT	VALUE
1. Death of Spouse, Parent, Boyfriend/Girlfriend	<input type="checkbox"/>	100
2. Divorce (of yourself or your parents)	<input type="checkbox"/>	65
3. Puberty	<input type="checkbox"/>	65
4. Pregnancy (or causing pregnancy)	<input type="checkbox"/>	65
5. Marital Separation or Breakup With Boyfriend/Girlfriend	<input type="checkbox"/>	60
6. Jail Term or Probation	<input type="checkbox"/>	60
7. Death of Other Family Member (other than spouse, parent or boyfriend/girlfriend)	<input type="checkbox"/>	60
8. Broken Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	55
9. Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	50
10. Serious Personal Injury or Illness	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
11. Marriage	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
12. Entering College or Beginning Next Level of School (starting junior high or high school)	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
13. Change in Independence or Responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
14. Any Drug and/or Alcoholic Use	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
15. Fired at Work or Expelled From School	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
16. Change in Alcohol or Drug Use	<input type="checkbox"/>	45
17. Reconciliation With Mate, Family or Boyfriend/Girlfriend (getting back together)	<input type="checkbox"/>	40
18. Trouble at School	<input type="checkbox"/>	40
19. Serious Health Problem of a Family Member	<input type="checkbox"/>	40
20. Working While Attending School	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
21. Working More Than 40 Hours Per Week	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
22. Changing Course of Study	<input type="checkbox"/>	35

23.	Change in Frequency of Dating	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
24.	Sexual Adjustment Problems (confusion of sexual identity)	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
25.	Gain of New Family Member (new baby born or parent remarries)	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
26.	Change in Work Responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	35
27.	Change in Financial State	<input type="checkbox"/>	30
28.	Death of a Close Friend (not a family member)	<input type="checkbox"/>	30
29.	Change to a Different Kind of Work	<input type="checkbox"/>	30
30.	Change in Number or Arguments with Mate, Family or Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	30
31.	Sleep Less Than 8 Hours Per Night	<input type="checkbox"/>	25
32.	Trouble With In-Laws or Boyfriend's or Girlfriend's Family	<input type="checkbox"/>	25
33.	Outstanding Personal Achievement (awards, grades, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	25
34.	Mate or Parents Start or Stop Working	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
35.	Begin or End School	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
36.	Change in Living Conditions (visitors in the home, remodeling house, change in roommates)	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
37.	Change in Personal Habits (start or stop a habit like smoking or dieting)	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
38.	Chronic Allergies	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
39.	Trouble With The Boss	<input type="checkbox"/>	20
40.	Change in Work Hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	15
41.	Change in Residence	<input type="checkbox"/>	15
42.	Change To a New School (other than graduation)	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
43.	Presently in Pre-Menstrual Period	<input type="checkbox"/>	15
44.	Change in Religious Activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	15
45.	Going in Debt (you or your family)	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
46.	Change in Frequency of Family Gatherings	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
47.	Vacation	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
48.	Presently in Winter Holiday Season	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
49.	Minor Violation of the Law	<input type="checkbox"/>	5

**Your total is:**

0

(Note: Total can not be changed by the visitor.)

If you have experience total stress within the last twelve months of 250 or greater, even with normal stress tolerance, you may be OVERSTRESSED. Persons with Low Stress tolerance may be OVERSTRESSED at levels as low as 150.

*This stress test, adapted from the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, was found on [www.teachhealth.com](http://www.teachhealth.com). I merely formatted it in HTML and added the proper coding to automatically add the totals, for the convenience of the participants of this survey.*