



How to help children and teens manage their stress

Stress is a normal part of life at every age. Here are healthy ways for children and teens to cope.

Date created: October 24, 2019



In the short term, stress can push a child to practice for her piano recital or inspire a teen to study when he'd rather be out with friends. But chronic stress is different.

Left unchecked, [long-term stress can contribute to a long list of physical and mental health problems](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml#pub3) (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml#pub3>). Prolonged stress can cause high blood pressure, weaken the immune system and contribute to diseases such as obesity and heart disease. It can also lead to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression—disorders that are becoming more common in youth. In a 2018 study, researchers analyzed data from the National Survey of Mental Health and found that

rates of anxiety and depression had increased in kids

(https://journals.lww.com/jrnldb/Abstract/2018/06000/Epidemiology_and_Impact_of_Health_Care.6.aspx)

ages 6 to 17, from 5.4% in 2003 to 8.4% in 2011-12.

Stress in young people doesn't always look like stress in adults. But like adults, children and teens can find healthy ways to cope. Together, young people and their parents can learn to spot the signs of excess stress and, with the right tools, manage it.

Sources of stress in young children

For young children, tension at home is a common source of stress. Children may be troubled by family discord or divorce, for example. Big life changes, such as a new stepparent or new home, can also be hard on a child. That's true even when the changes are happy ones, such as the arrival of a new sibling.

School is another frequent source of concern for kids. Young children might be stressed about making friends, dealing with bullies or getting along with their teachers. They might also be anxious about tests and grades.

Sources of stress in adolescents and teens

As children get older, their sources of stress expand. Teens are more likely than young children to be stressed by events or situations outside the home.

But as it is for younger kids, school remains a top stressor. A 2013 survey by APA found that [stress was extremely common among teenagers \(/news/press/releases/stress/2013/highlights\)](#).: 83% of the teens surveyed said school was a significant or somewhat significant source of stress. But academics aren't the only thing worrying today's youth. A 2018 APA survey found that young people ages 15 to 21 — Generation Z — report [significant stress around social issues in the news \(PDF, 3.7MB\) ↗ \(/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf\)](#)., including gun violence and school shootings, rising suicide rates, climate change, treatment of immigrants and sexual harassment.

Peers can help buffer stress, but can also be a source of it. Social relationships are especially important in adolescence. Many teens worry about fitting in, their first romantic relationships and peer pressure around substance use and sex.

Recognize the signs of stress

Signs of stress in youth can show up in a number of ways:

- ▪ **Irritability and anger:** Children don't always have the words to describe how they are feeling and sometimes tension bubbles over into a bad mood. Stressed-out kids and teens might be more short-tempered or argumentative than normal.
- ▪ **Changes in behavior:** A young child who used to be a great listener is suddenly acting out. A once-active teen now doesn't want to leave the house. Sudden changes can be a sign that stress levels are high.
- ▪ **Trouble sleeping:** A child or teen might complain of feeling tired all the time, sleep more than usual or have trouble falling asleep at night.
- ▪ **Neglecting responsibilities:** If an adolescent suddenly drops the ball on homework, forgets obligations or starts procrastinating more than usual, stress might be a factor.
- ▪ **Eating changes:** Eating too much or too little can both be reactions to stress.
- ▪ **Getting sick more often:** Stress often shows up as physical symptoms. Children who feel stress often report headaches or stomachaches, and might make frequent trips to the school nurse's office.

Stress management for kids and teens

Facing stressors is a fact of life, for children and adults. These strategies can help keep stress in check:

- ▪ **Sleep well.** Sleep is essential for physical and emotional well-being. Experts recommend nine to 12 hours of sleep a night for 6- to 12-year olds. Teens need eight to 10 hours a night (<https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/American-Academy-of-Pediatrics-Supports-Childhood-Sleep-Guidelines.aspx>). Sleep needs to be a priority to keep stress in check. To protect shut-eye, limit screen use at night and avoid keeping digital devices in the bedroom.
- ▪ **Exercise.** Physical activity is an essential stress reliever for people of all ages. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 60 minutes a day of activity for children ages 6 to 17.

- ▪ **Talk it out.** Talking about stressful situations with a trusted adult can help kids and teens put things in perspective and find solutions.
- ▪ **Make time for fun — and quiet.** Just like adults, kids and teens need time to do what brings them joy, whether that’s unstructured time to play with building bricks or uninterrupted hours to practice music or art. Also, while some children thrive bouncing from one activity to the next, others need more down time. Find a healthy balance between favorite activities and free time.
- ▪ **Get outside.** Spending time in nature is an effective way to relieve stress and improve overall well-being. Researchers have found that people who live in areas with more green space have less depression, anxiety and stress (<https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/11/3/3453>).
- ▪ **Write about it.** Research has found that expressing oneself in writing can help reduce mental distress and improve well-being. Some research has found, for example, that writing about positive feelings (<https://mental.jmir.org/2018/4/e11290/>)—such as the things you’re grateful for or proud of — can ease symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- ▪ **Learn mindfulness.** In a study of a five-week mindfulness training program for 13- to 18-year-olds, researchers found that teens who learned mindfulness experienced significantly less mental distress (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/camh.12057>) than teens who did not.

How parents can help

Parents and other caregivers have an important part to play, by adopting their own healthy habits and helping children and teens find stress-managing strategies. Some ways parents can take action:

- ▪ **Model healthy coping.** Caregivers can talk with children about how they’ve thought about and dealt with their own stressful situations.
- ▪ **Let kids be problem-solvers.** It’s natural to want to fix your child’s problems. But when parents swoop in to solve every little glitch, their children don’t have a chance to learn healthy coping skills. Let your children try to solve their low-stakes problems on their own, and they’ll gain confidence that they can deal with stressors and setbacks.
- ▪ **Promote media literacy.** Today’s kids spend a lot of time online, where they can run into questionable content, cyberbullying or the peer pressures of social media. Parents can

help by teaching their children to be savvy digital consumers, and by limiting screen time.

- **Combat negative thinking.** “*I’m terrible at math.*” “*I hate my hair.*” “*I’ll never make the team. Why try out?*” Children and teens can easily fall into the trap of negative thinking. When children use negative self-talk, though, don’t just disagree. Ask them to really think about whether what they say is true, or remind them of times they worked hard and improved. Learning to frame things positively will help them develop resilience to stress.

How psychologists can help

Psychologists are experts in helping people manage stress and establish positive mental health habits. Visit [Div. 53 \(Society of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology \(https://effectivechildtherapy.org/\)\)](https://effectivechildtherapy.org/), for advice about choosing a psychologist and information about evidence-based treatments.

Thanks to psychologists Mary Alvord, PhD, and Raquel Halfond, PhD, who assisted with this article.

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