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## Children Under Stress: Teaching Our Kids to Bounce Back

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Homework. Tests. Extracurricular activities. Arguments with friends. School cliques. Peer pressure. Feeling any stress? Fights with parents. School admissions tests and interviews. Parent's layoff. Death of a loved one. Illness. Divorce. How about now? Feeling stressed yet? Bullying. School violence. Drugs. Terrorism. War.

Feeling overwhelmed? Your children might be, too.

Children are faced with ever-increasing pressures, prompting the American Psychological Association (APA) to launch a national campaign entitled "Resilience for Kids & Teens" to help kids deal with stress and develop the skills necessary to bounce back.

Parents play a key role in helping their children learn these skills. But first, the experts point out, you must recognize when a child may be stressed.

"I really don't think people realize how much stress there is," says Dr. Sara L. Weiss, Manhattan clinical psychologist and Public Education Coordinator for the New York State Psychological Association.

"Children, especially younger children, have a way of pulling themselves together and playing even when they're upset. The inconsistency of this is confusing for parents and they may not realize the child really is stressed."

Adds Laura Barbanel, Ed.D., psychologist in Brooklyn Heights and APA fellow: "Parents tend to underestimate how much children model themselves after their parent." In addition to the typical sources of stress for children, Dr. Barbanel has seen youngsters who experience additional stresses that are a clear reflection of their parents' concerns.

### Stress signals

Signs of stress tend to vary by age of the child and the severity of the situation. Young children may regress in behavior (thumb-sucking, bedwetting, tantrums, clinging). Older children may withdraw or be irritable. They may have headaches and stomachaches with no apparent medical explanation. Their eating or sleeping patterns may change.

"Any sudden dramatic changes in behavior, or unwillingness to engage in activities that have been engaged in willingly, may be signs of stress," says Dr. Barbanel.

A certain amount of stress is normal and can even be motivating. However, children need to have effective coping mechanisms, the skills necessary to bounce back, and support from parents.

## Expressing feelings of stress

"Have plenty of conversations with your child," Dr. Weiss advises. "Know what they're thinking about, what they're talking about, how they sound when they talk with you. Look for verbal and nonverbal cues about how they're feeling."

Dr. James Koelln, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Queens, agrees. "Keep the lines of communication open with your children. Provide opportunities for them to discuss their concerns."

**Michael Portney, child psychologist at Manhattan's Smart4Kidz, says "Talking directly about emotions with kids is always a wonderful thing that parents can't or don't do enough of." He recommends helping children to make the stress more concrete by asking where they feel it in their bodies. Ask, "What color is your stress? Is it hot or cold? What shape is it?"**

Encourage your children to draw, paint, write about or act out what they're feeling. These creative outlets can help a child express feelings on levels that conversation may not address.

## What not to say or do

**While talking with your child about stressful situations can be very helpful, experts recommend a careful balance. Don't blow the stress out of proportion and don't keep bringing it up if your child seems ready to move on. On the other hand, don't give false reassurances ("everything will be fine") as this dismisses your child's worries as illegitimate or inappropriate. "Denying events is not a good idea, nor is excessive sugar coating," says Portney. "If you explain things to a kid in terms that are developmentally appropriate, you'd be surprised how sophisticated they really are."**

**He cautions parents not to use punishment to try to change undesirable behavior caused by stress. "Don't ask a child to tough it out. And never, never, never tell a child who is responding to stress to be a big boy/girl or act like a grownup. Kids are not grownups — they're kids!"**

Dr. Weiss reminds parents to respect their child's privacy even when the child is going through a stressful situation. Though it may be tempting to search their drawers and journals and listen in on their phone calls to find out what's going on, these actions erode trust, and in order to be able to help your child, you need his or her full trust.

## Attending to physical needs

It's especially important to ensure your child is eating well and getting plenty of sleep and exercise during stressful times (when these areas tend to be neglected). Help older children to learn the importance of taking care of themselves physically as well as mentally.

**Children can benefit from the same techniques we try to remember as adults when we're stressed — deep breathing exercises, stretching and relaxation. Teach your child these basic skills, and help your child to practice them regularly. Such techniques are part of every class for children at Smart4Kidz, a researched-based program of yoga-inspired exercises, breathing, stretching, music, storytelling, and creativity to help kids deal with stress.**

## Stress as a learning opportunity

Stressful situations can be excellent learning opportunities. Though it may be clichéd, the old "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade" metaphor can provide a useful opening for talking with your child about various options for dealing with a stressful situation, the potential positive outcomes of the situation,

and what your child can learn about him- or herself and others.

You may also want to consider whether your child could benefit from learning time management or organizational skills, if the stress stems from general disorganization or an inability to get things done. If school tests are a source of stress for your child, consider helping your child to develop effective test-taking skills. If your child's stress comes from conflict with others, teach your child effective ways to resolve conflict.

### Overscheduled kids and stress

A major cause of stress for today's children (and parents!) is simply being involved in too many activities, especially competitive ones. Pressures to pursue every known form of enrichment for children abound in Manhattan, where even preschoolers compete for enrollment in choice private schools. School entrance exams and interviews are a significant source of stress for many youngsters and their parents. Once the child is accepted, the pressures to perform academically excel in extracurriculars, build an impressive portfolio of accomplishments, and generally boost the cachet of the school can become overwhelming.

High-stakes testing in schools has led to increased homework and a focus on test preparation, adding to student stress. Art, PE, music and other creative outlets which can help children better cope with stress are increasingly being cut out of the school curriculum. Concerned parents then enroll their children in a myriad of afterschool programs to fill this gap, further decreasing the child's opportunities for downtime and increasing their stress.

Child psychologists and counselors have been calling for an end to this madness. Books like *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* by Alvin A. Rosenfeld, M.D., *The Hurried Child* by David Elkind, Ph.D., and *Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World* by William J. Doherty, Ph.D., and Barbara Z. Carlson caution parents against structuring and over-scheduling their children's daily existence with classes, sports, academics and targeted enrichment. Instead, they advocate seeking balance and providing children with plenty of family time, unstructured playtime and time to just chill out.

### Family stress

Finding such a balance can be especially challenging if your family is going through a stressful situation such as separation or divorce, job loss, financial difficulties, illness or death of a loved one, or other trauma. At these times, it is especially important to pay close attention to how your child is coping. Spend extra time with your child. Maintain as many of the child's daily routines and family rituals as possible, and limit the other changes in your child's life when the family is going through a major transition.

Dr. Barbanel highlights a common myth about family stress. "Parents may believe that if they don't talk about problems in the family, or argue in front of the children, the children will not experience stress over it. Children do tune into what their parents are stressed about. There are few true 'secrets' in the family. This doesn't mean you should share all of your intimate details with your children. It does mean that when things are happening that worry you, children become aware of it, and you might be better off talking with them than letting them imagine even worse things."

Dr. Edward Petrosky, a psychologist Forest Hills who specializes in anxiety disorders and learning disabilities, suggests, "Discuss stressful events in a calm, matter-of-fact way. Avoid becoming hysterical. Children can easily sense a parent's anxiety, which in turn boosts the child's own level of anxiety."

Children may feel like they're the only ones experiencing the many strong feelings such situations may provoke. Help your child to understand that such feelings are normal, while also paying attention to feelings that are not necessarily normal and for which help should be sought.

As much as they need to talk with and be with their parents during times of family stress, children may also benefit from the support of other adults and friends. Schools are becoming more savvy about such needs and many schools offer support groups for kids. Banana Splits is one such group for kids whose parents are separating, going thru divorce or remarrying.

"Adults need to be centered themselves when going through high-stress times," says Dr. Weiss. She advises parents to work on dealing with their own stress levels and to seek help if necessary. Research has shown a clear link between the stress level of parents and the stress level of their children. "Parents may want to go with their child to a psychologist or therapist and say, 'These are the things we're going through. What can you suggest to help us navigate through this?'"

### Getting outside help

While basic stress management strategies can help children in many situations, sometimes kids who are experiencing high levels of stress or simply not coping well may need more extensive professional help.

Major changes in your child's behavior, eating, sleeping or other typical patterns may indicate serious traumatic stress which, if not addressed, may push young people to seek escape through drugs, drinking or suicide. If your child becomes emotionally volatile, avoids school and social activities, gets lower grades at school, talks negatively about him- or herself, or exhibits a general sense of depression or hopelessness, or if any behavior changes last and your child seems visibly stressed, Dr. Weiss advises seeking professional counseling promptly.

"Stress becomes a problem when it becomes the focal point of a child's life and interferes with the child's ability to feel happy or function effectively," says Dr. Petrosky.

### Fostering resilience

**Fostering the necessary resilience in children to deal with life's stresses begins in infancy, says Portney. "Coming to terms with the world is the first and cardinal source of stress in developmental terms. Here, we need all the help we can get. Pick your baby up and show tons of consistent love and guidance, and you'll bring a being into the world who can handle future stress with great resilience and reason."**

"Provide a safe and supportive environment for your children to live and grow in," says Dr. Koelln. "Provide children with plenty of unstructured downtime where they can be more creative and draw on their own resources."

He also advises parents to encourage children to establish relationships with peers, family and helpful adults to build a network of support they can rely on and turn to in times of stress.

The APA's Resilience campaign offers additional suggestions to foster resilience in your children:

- Provide a calm, positive role model for your children as you handle your own daily stresses.
- Share what you've learned from stressful situations.
- Let your child see you making decisions, moving toward your goals, and adapting to change.
- Share your optimism that even when times are hard, there is a better future ahead.
- Maintain a positive outlook and a sense of hopefulness to see you through stressful times and radiate that hopefulness to your children.

By fostering resilience in your children, you can help them to weather life's storms with confidence and optimism.

Resources:

Stress management classes for kids:

**SMART-4-Kidz (Stress Management And Relaxation Techniques for Children and Adolescents) is a research-based program of yoga-inspired exercises, music, storytelling, and creativity to help kids deal with daily stresses. Classes are offered in several Brooklyn locations.**

**Website: [www.smart4kidz.org](http://www.smart4kidz.org)**

**Phone: (212) 595-KIDZ (5439) or (718) 369-SMART (7278)**

**Email: [info@smart4kidz.org](mailto:info@smart4kidz.org)**

Online:

- APA's Resilience Guide for Parents & Teachers:  
[www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=39](http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=39)

- APA's Resilience for Teens: Got Bounce?

[www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=40](http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=40)

Audio:

- Indigo Dreams: Meditation and Relaxation Bedtime Stories for Children, Improve Sleep, Manage Stress and Anxiety, by Lori Lite (2004)

Books:

- A Boy and a Bear: The Children's Relaxation Book, by Lori Lite & M. Hartigan (Specialty Press, 1996) (For ages 3-10)

- Don't Pop Your Cork on Mondays: The Children's Anti-Stress Book, by Adolph J. Moser & Dav Pilkey (of Captain Underpants fame) (Landmark Editions, 1988) NOTE: Though an older book, it still gets high marks from parents and kids. Even better — plenty of used copies are available online (check Amazon, Barnes & Noble and eBay). (For ages 9-12)

- Don't Sweat The Small Stuff For Teens, by Richard Carlson, Ph.D. (Hyperion, 2000) (For teens)

- Going Lightly: Terrific Tips to Lighten Your Daily Load, by Sharon Bowman (Bowperson Publishing, 2003)

- The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap, by Alvin A. Rosenfeld, M.D. and Nicole Wise (St. Martin's Griffin, 2001)

- The Hurried Child (3rd Edition), by David Elkind, Ph.D. (Perseus, 2001)

- Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World, by William J.

Doherty, Ph.D., and Barbara Z. Carlson (Owl Books, 2002)

- Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope, and Optimism in Your Child, by Robert Brooks & Sam Goldstein (McGraw-Hill, 2002)