

# Reducing *STRESS* in Children

Stress is a normal reaction to pressure and a part of *all* our lives, including children. However, too much stress can be overwhelming and unhealthy. Excessive stress has been cited for causing problems from nail biting in children as young as three years, to tension-induced stomachaches, headaches, ulcers, and depression. Though no one can remove all pressure from your children's lives, parents play an important role in recognizing the warning signs of "over" stress, and reducing the tension that causes it.



## *Some possible sources and signs of stress in children*

### **Preschoolers**

**Sources:** Changes in childcare; starting school; new sibling or family member; being disciplined; toilet learning; being away from a parent; fear of being deserted; fear of not being safe; the 'unknown.'

**Signs:** Has less energy than normal; increased irritability; onset of nightmares or night terrors; increased clinginess; increased number of tantrums; more crying.

**Tension-Busting Suggestions:** Preschoolers do not have the ability to think rationally or use problem-solving skills to work through situations. Though your children's fears may seem silly to you, they are very real to them. Kids in this age group need to feel secure and reassured. Help your children understand situations by explaining what is happening calmly and in simple terms they can understand. Teach your children how to express feelings in words such as, "I don't like it when..." or "It scares me when..." Most importantly, give your preschoolers plenty of love, support, and affection. Hug, cuddle and praise them every chance you get!

### **School-Age Children (6-12 Years)**

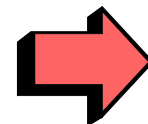


**Sources:** Tests; feeling slow, ugly, or too smart; making friends; sibling rivalry; arguments with friends; personality clash with a teacher; worries about their changing body; being teased or bullied; being over-scheduled with activities, schoolwork, and chores (leaving no down time); feeling unsafe in school.

**Signs:** Withdrawal; acting younger than they are (regression); problems sleeping; bed wetting; grinding teeth; developing speech problems; having trouble in school; stealing; lying; fighting; frequent falling and accidents; sadness; crying.

**Tension-Busting Suggestions:** School-age kids are starting to develop some problem-solving skills, but still need adults' help in this area. Try to be understanding of the issues your children face, and be there for them to talk things over with you. Help them brainstorm some possible solutions to problems. Role play stressful situations with your children to help them figure out constructive ways to handle problems. Try not to add pressure to your children's lives by refraining from pushing too hard. Work with your children's teachers to set realistic goals surrounding school work.

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The information for this double-sided tip sheet was gathered from many sources, including articles "Raising A Stress Free Child" by Laura Flynn McCarthy at [www.parenting.com](http://www.parenting.com) and "Helping Your Child Deal With Stress" by the North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Services at [www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/dro-41.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/drought/dro-41.html).

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## Teenagers

**Sources:** Experiences related to growing up, such as their changing bodies, sexuality, and searching for their identity; (perceived) criticism; tests; pressure to excel in school; peer pressure to experiment with alcohol, drugs, or sex; school violence; uncertainty about personal appearance; not enough time; lack of confidence; responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, holding a part-time job, chores, etc.

**Signs:** Excessive daydreaming; nervous tics such as nail biting, unusual eye blinking, twitching; isolation; perfectionist behavior; failure in school; neglecting personal appearance; increased fatigue; increased irritability; withdrawal; rebelliousness; getting into trouble; eating/weight problems; substance abuse.

**Tension-Busting Suggestions:** Communicate with your teens; sit down together and discuss their schedule. Are they feeling swamped or overwhelmed? Although it is important for teens to have responsibilities, they also need time to "play." Offer suggestions, but don't be offended if they don't value your advice - it's part of the age. Regardless, your teens will appreciate the one-on-one attention.

## *Stress Buster Checklist*

**Do my children ever see *me* relax?**

Children learn by example. Show them that taking "time out" is important.



**When I am under stress, what kind of coping skills do I demonstrate?**

Children learn how to cope with stress from the adults closest to them.

**Do I have fun with my children everyday?**

Playing with your children, in an activity of their choice, a little each day will help them relax.

**Do my children have free time blocked out during the day?**

We want our kids to succeed in many areas, and when they aren't doing something, we think they they are missing out. However, allowing kids time to zone out and regroup is as critical as sports practice and music lessons.

**Is there enough routine in my children's lives?**

Younger kids need regularity. Set mealtimes, bedtimes, or other scheduled parts of the day give children a sense of security.

**Is there time for my kids to be active each day?**

For many kids, the way to let off steam is to run around, get loud and rambunctious. Physical activity, such as biking, skating, jogging, etc. is a great "stress buster" for children, teens and adults!

**Do I talk with my children every day about their lives?**

This is one way of finding out the sources of stress your children are experiencing - the first step in helping them.

**Do I catch my children being good and praise them?**

Many of us quickly point out when children misbehave, but we rarely say, "I'm proud of the way you..." Teens often feel unappreciated. Saying "thank you" and offering honest praise goes a long way.

*If your children demonstrate excessive stress over a long period of time, seem very angry, withdrawn, or depressed despite your "stress busting" efforts, they may need outside support. Your child's doctor may be a good resource. Children may require additional support if they are experiencing circumstances beyond day to day stress, such as a death in the family, family illness, or major life changes.*