

How to Help Your Child Cope with Life & Stress

Every parent's dream is to raise perfect children who have no worries and lead charmed, happy lives free of pain and hurt. We dream that we can keep our children safe from loss, heartache, and danger. But even if we could, would it really help them?

If we want our children to experience the world as fully as possible—with all its pain and thankfully, with all its joy—our goal will have to be *resilience*. Resilience is the ability to rise above challenges and live in this less-than-perfect world while moving forward with hope and confidence. Read on to find out how you can help your children be more resilient. There's also a special section about helping your children manage stress.

Seven 'C's of Resilience:

All children have abilities and strengths that can help them cope with everyday life. As parents, you can develop your children's resilience by paying attention to those strengths and building on them.

But what are the ingredients of resilience? There are 7 essential components, all interrelated, called the 7 Crucial Cs.

- **Competence**—the ability to handle situations effectively.
- **Confidence**—the solid belief in one's own abilities.
- **Connection**—close ties to family, friends, school, and community give children a sense of security and values that prevent them from seeking destructive alternatives to love and attention.
- **Character**—a fundamental sense of right and wrong that helps children make wise choices, contribute to the world, and become stable adults.
- **Contribution**—when children realize that the world is a better place *because they are in it*, they will take actions and make choices that improve the world. They will also develop a sense of purpose to carry them through future challenges.
- **Coping**—children who learn to cope effectively with stress are better prepared to overcome life's challenges.
- **Control**—when children realize that they can control their decisions and actions, they're more likely to know that they have what it takes to bounce back.

Building Resilience:

Parents are the most important source of love, support, and guidance for their children and therefore have the greatest effect on resilience. Here's how you can make a difference.

- **Love.** To be strong, your children need love, absolute security, and a deep connection to at least one adult.
- **Let go.** Sometimes the best thing you can do to help your children learn is get out of their way while allowing them to figure things out on their own.
- **Expect the best.** Your children will live up or down to your expectations of them, so expect them to be kind, caring individuals who will give their best effort.
- **Listen.** Listening to your children attentively is more important than any words you can say. This applies to routine situations as well as times of crisis.
- **Set a good example.** Nothing you say is as important as what your children *see you* doing on a daily basis.
- **Encourage.** Your children can only take positive steps when they have the confidence to do so. They gain that confidence when they have solid reasons to believe they are competent.
- **Teach.** If your children are to develop the strength to overcome challenges, they need to know that they can control what happens to them. Helping your children develop a wide range of positive coping strategies will prepare them to overcome almost anything and make them far less likely to try many of the risk behaviors we all fear.

Coping Strategies—Managing Stress:

Adults deal with stress in various ways, from helpful strategies like exercise, meditation, long walks, and turning down overtime or weekend work, to less helpful ways like using painkillers, smoking, or drinking another glass of wine. How do children deal with stress? Depending on their ages and temperaments, some kids withdraw, sulk, or zone out, while others act aggressively, talk back, and toss tantrums. Older children may turn to the coping mechanisms that they see their peers using such as smoking, drugs, fighting, sexual activity, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and delinquency. Adults usually see these activities as behavior problems and underestimate the amount of stress that young people are under today. In actuality, these negative behaviors are often attempts to counter stress, push it under, chill out, and make it all go away.

When kids are stressed, their first impulse is to relieve the discomfort. They don't sit down and rationally think about the best way to do it. They find relief by acting impulsively or following the paths most readily available to them, the ones they see other kids taking. Most young people simply don't know more healthy and effective alternatives. Unless we guide them toward positive ways to relieve and manage stress, they will choose the negative behaviors of their peers or the culture they absorb from the media. They will become caught up in a cycle of negative coping methods and risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs to relieve their stress. We need to help them avoid that cycle.

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Signs of Stress:

The following are some common signs of stress in children. Keep in mind that many children and teens have some of these signs and do just fine. But they may be signals that you should check in with your children and consider seeking professional help.

- Slipping school performance
- Sleep problems
- Recurrent Nightmares
- Returning to less mature behaviors (for example, thumb sucking, tantrums)
- Renewed separation anxiety
- New bedwetting
- Irritability, outbursts, or tantrums
- Hopelessness
- Change in eating habits
- Anger
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Loss of friends
- New circle of friends
- Radically new style of dress
- Physical symptoms such as belly pain, head-aches, fatigue, or chest pain (Always see your pediatrician before assuming these are stress symptoms.)
- Missing school because of frequent symptoms
- Drug, alcohol, or cigarette use

Ten-Point Stress-Management Plan:

People with a wide a range of coping strategies can manage stress more easily. The following plan is designed for adults and children. Remember that when you model healthy coping strategies, your children learn by example.

1. **Figure out what the problem is and make it manageable.** What is the cause of the stress, what is it doing to you, and how can you solve the problem? Learn to break big problems into smaller manageable parts.
2. **Avoid things that bring you down.** If we teach kids to identify the people who frustrate or bother them, places where stress usually rises, and things that provoke or intensify stress, they can learn when and how to avoid those stressors.
3. **Let some things go.** People who waste their energy worrying about things they can't change don't have enough energy left over to fix the things they can.
4. **Exercise.** When people exercise they keep their bodies healthy, think more clearly, and manage stress better because exercise uses up stress energy.
5. **Learn to relax your body.** People who use deep breathing exercises, changes in body posture, and other relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation can control their stress.
6. **Eat well.** A healthy body helps us manage stress.
7. **Sleep well.** Getting enough sleep on a consistent basis is essential for good health and keeping stress levels manageable.
8. **Take instant vacations.** Use your mind to imagine a special place whenever you need to escape the stress of the moment. Reading, a nature walk, hobbies, and a warm bath all offer great instant vacations.
9. **Release emotions.** We often lock unwanted feelings away, thinking we will deal with them later. But for many people, later never comes. Create outlets for feelings and emotions such as art or music, talking feelings out with someone you trust, writing down feelings in a journal, prayer or meditation, or having a good laugh or cry.
10. **Make the world a better place.** When we contribute to our communities we can put our own troubles in perspective and build a sense of purpose.

Keep in Mind...

- When you choose strategies from this plan, select those you think will work, not those that will impress someone else.
- The plan cannot be imposed on children; it has to be welcomed to be effective. If your children don't take to one strategy, try another.
- Don't stress about the stress-management plan! Don't feel that your children must be exposed to everything in the plan to manage stress successfully.
- These points are suggestions that you can adapt for your children and yourself. No one is expected to use all of them all the time.

Getting Help

All people, even the most stable, reach their limit sometimes. It is not a sign of weakness on our children's part, nor is it a sign of poor parenting on our part.

Whenever your children seem troubled, the first step is to reinforce that you are there to be fully supportive. Listen, give hugs, be a sounding board, sometimes even offer advice, but give them hope that things will get better. If you feel your children need more help than you can give, be assured that mental health professionals who work with children have the training to ensure a safe, even enjoyable experience. Ask your children's pediatrician, school counselor, or clergyperson for recommendations and then speak to the professional to feel confident you have found the right match for your children.

Adapted from Ginsburg KR, Iablow MM. *A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Your Child Roots and Wings*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; .

Rev. 03/2021 COPING.doc