

# STRESS

## HOW WELL ARE YOUR KIDS COPING?

BY SUE EMOND

**STRESS IS A FACT OF LIFE. AND WHILE PARENTS OFTEN TALK ABOUT HOW STRESSED** out they are, their kids might be living with more stress than the parents realize. "I've definitely seen stress increasing in kids over the past few decades," says Jeffrey I. Dolgan, PhD, chief of psychology and director of psychology ambulatory services at The Children's Hospital. More than anything, he says, kids are over-stressed because they're over-burdened and sometimes unnecessarily.



## Sources of Stress for Kids

Dolgan explains that kids are vulnerable to stressors in three main areas of their lives: home, school and environments. Family problems are the kids' problems, too. Whether it's parental conflicts, financial instability or a death in the family (even of a pet), kids undoubtedly experience some level of stress. And embarrassing situations, as well as extremely challenging events, can be especially stressful. So can sadness and feelings of loneliness. And though kids can feel overwhelmed at times by their schoolwork, their social environment at school can affect them even more. "Overall, kids worry less about academics and more about fitting in," Dolgan says.

Julie Lambert, a Denver financial services VP and mother of two, says her 7th grade daughter has a strong desire to be liked by everyone, and especially girls her age. "Christy can get pretty upset when acceptance issues come up at school," says Julie. Christy is also a straight-A student and extremely busy. A talented gymnast, Christy trains 16 hours per week and competes at the state level—and deals with regular fatigue from her training schedule, says her mom. And when she's tired, "she starts worrying more about the little things." When the stress hits, "I talk to Christy about prioritizing the stressors, and then help her with problem solving," says Julie.

## Are Your Kids Over-Booked?



Though Christy is busy, she's fortunate enough to have parents who insisted she forego softball when she chose to take up gymnastics. Dolgan says that some kids have too much going on and are experiencing high levels of stress because of it. "Sometimes parents can hardly keep up with their kids' after-school activities, but unfortunately, it's sometimes the parents who have engaged their children in too many activities." After awhile, says Dolgan, parents have to "stop adding and start subtracting activities." But even a single activity can be too stressful for some kids. "Parents and coaches can have unrealistic expectations of the kids and can put unhealthy demands on them." What's important is making sure that kids are involved in the right amount of activities and the right kind of activities—for them.

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Rachel Ancar, a busy Denver high school sophomore, says that "sometimes it's hard to juggle school, tae kwon do and sports, while trying to still hang out with my friends." Overall, though, Rachel thinks she handles stress pretty well and hasn't taken on too much. Yet her hectic schedule does get to her at times, and Rachel tries to find a balance. "I haven't really found a way to prevent stress," says Rachel, "but when it hits I like to go home and lie on my bed for a while to relax. Or I might take a break from schoolwork and watch TV, talk to friends or read." Dolgan says if you ask your kids for some ideas of how they might cope with stress in their lives, they can probably come up with a list pretty quickly.

## How Parents Can Help



- Be a good model of how to cope with stress
- Help your kids to eat well and to get enough sleep and exercise
- Teach them relaxation techniques
- Rehearse stressful situations ahead of time with your kids
- Limit their exposure to negative media, such as TV news
- Monitor your kids daily for stress levels: How are they thinking, feeling, behaving?
- Watch for the sources of stress and make modifications when appropriate
- If you're concerned with your child's stress level, talk to him
- If your concerns continue, consult with your pediatrician or family practitioner

## How Kids Can Help Themselves



- When you feel stressed, talk about your feelings and thoughts
- Make a list of healthy ways to deal with stress, and use it
- Exercise regularly, even if it's walking through the park or around the zoo
- Break large tasks into smaller ones—don't put off writing that term paper until the night before it's due
- Pay attention to negative thoughts—when you notice one, replace it with a positive thought
- Make sure your activities are right for you—and most importantly, fun!



## How Kids Can Better Cope with Stress

According to Dolgan, children who aren't handling stress well typically react to it in one of two ways: they internalize or they externalize. Those who internalize stress can appear anxious or they might complain of a tummy ache or headache. Then some might simply withdraw. Yet others are more prone to act out and exhibit aggressive behavior, such as fighting at school. Teaching coping skills to kids is important so they'll be prepared for stress, which is inevitable. "The fight or flight response to stress is normal, and kids need to understand the best response for them, given the situation," Dolgan says. "Also, what works at one age might not work at another."

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### **"DON'T LET YOUR KIDS BECOME MYSTERIES. ASSESS THEIR BEHAVIORS, THOUGHTS, AND FEELINGS."**

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Dolgan explains that relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and yoga, are particularly important for kids to know. "Once kids know and practice these skills, they can make better choices when stress arises."

Master Chris Natzke, a 6th degree black belt and master instructor at the Family Martial Arts Center in Aurora, sees several important ways that martial arts can help kids deal with stress. "The physical activity of kicking, punching and blocking is a great stress release. So is the yelling (ki hap in Korean) and focused breathing—a technique that can also aid kids in non-violent conflict resolution. Plus, when a child's confidence grows with their body and mind from martial arts training, an increase in self esteem can have a direct effect on lessening stress," says Master Natzke. "And for kids who suffer from being bullied, the boost in confidence from martial arts can make them a less attractive target for bullies, and can even eliminate the bullying altogether."

Parents can play a big role in how their children react to stress. Most importantly, says Dolgan, parents need to model healthy coping skills. "Parents who are racing around frantically are not great examples for their kids."

Sleep and diet, as parents can attest, often affect mood and ability to cope with stress. Annie Sasseville, a registered dietician at The Children's Hospital, offers advice on meal planning: "Make sure that kids eat an adequate amount of carbohydrates for energy, along with protein. But watch their fat intake—too much can leave them feeling sluggish. For finicky eaters, and especially those who don't get enough fruits and vegetables, consider a children's chewable multi-vitamin. Also, keep in mind that kids are more comfortable with schedules, and making meals and snacks predictable for them typically works best."

## When Should Parents Seek Help?

Parents should monitor kids daily for how they're responding to stress, Dolgan says. "Don't let your kids become mysteries. Assess their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Take note of anything out of the ordinary, and talk to them to learn more. If you're concerned, consult with others, like their friends' parents, their teachers, and their coaches. And watch for the sources of stress." He explains that if a child becomes anxious for a day or two about a particular event that has happened, or will soon happen, you're probably okay. But, for instance, if an unusual response to a stressor lasts for a couple weeks or more, consult with your pediatrician or family practitioner—they can refer you to a mental health practitioner, if necessary. The bottom line, says Dolgan, is that parents should seek help if they're worried. "Parents really do know."

## Some Signs of Stress in Kids

Ask yourself, "Is this behavior unusual for my child?"

- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling especially down, edgy or guilty
- Sleep problems (difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much)
- Laughing or crying for no reason
- Wanting to be alone all the time
- Being particularly pessimistic
- Not enjoying activities they used to enjoy
- Feeling especially resentful of people or things
- Changes in appetite
- Headaches, stomachaches or skin rashes
- Readily blaming others for things
- Complaining about having too much to do





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# MOMS: IS YOUR STRESS LEVEL STRESSING YOU?

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BY SUE EMOND

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**LET'S FACE IT—BEING A MOM IS A STRESSFUL JOB.** From toddlers throwing tantrums to pesky teens to spouses on the road, our stress can be difficult to keep in check. And sometimes we moms get so busy caring for others that we don't even notice when our stress has gotten out of hand.

According to Dr. Ayelet Talmi, associate director of the Irving Harris Program in Child Development and Infant Mental Health and assistant professor of the departments of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Colorado Denver and at The Children's Hospital, some stress is unavoidable. But too much stress can negatively impact the areas of moms' lives that they care about the most:

- We moms can be so preoccupied with our stressors that we're not really available to our children and partners
- When we feel increased pressure in one area of life—like a demanding job or a sick child—we're unable to fully engage in the other areas
- Those edgy feelings caused by stress can crank up the chances that we'll take out our stress on those closest to us
- Chronic stress can lead to fatigue and may have enduring mental and physical health ramifications for us

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## Taking Charge of Stress

So it's clear that moms need to care for themselves and not let stress take charge. To feel balanced, energized, and able to thrive under the demands of motherhood, we need to take an active role in reducing stress. Consider the advice of Dr. Talmi: “Take care of yourself. You cannot be the best mother you can be when you aren't taking care of yourself. Sleep. Eat well. Exercise if you can. Find time every day that is yours alone. The more you enjoy life, the more your children, family, and friends will enjoy you.”

## When to Seek Help

- Stress seems like a permanent aspect rather than a transient event
- Stress is impairing our ability to perform our roles and responsibilities
- Stress is causing high levels of distress that can't be managed using typical coping strategies

## Think You May Be Over-Stressed?

- Get social support from family members, friends or hired help
- Let someone else know how you're feeling
- Seek professional help from a local mental health center or your doctor

## Beating Stress When You're at Home



- Shower or take a hot bath to relax your muscles and mind
- Lie down and breathe quietly
- Call a friend
- Take a mini-break or two for activities you love
- Write in a journal
- Take a brisk walk outside or on a treadmill
- Practice yoga or simple stretching
- Look for relaxation and meditation videos online featuring brief routines
- Watch a funny movie!
- Try chamomile tea
- Use lavender aroma in your home
- Learn to say 'no' to family members, especially when you're overwhelmed

## Beating Stress While You're on the Run

- Try some deep breathing—put one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest, and practice breathing so only your lower hand moves when you inhale
- Call a friend
- Play your favorite mellow CDs in the car
- Snack on healthy foods
- Avoid negative self-talk
- Close your eyes for a moment and visualize a favorite place of yours
- Say something kind to a stranger