

THE CHALLENGES OF CHILDHOOD

Kids of all ages face stress, and they may not be equipped to handle it. Learn how to spot the signs and help them cope

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AS GROWN-UPS, WE HAVE OUR share of daily stressors: mortgages, high-pressure jobs, iPhones that light up like a Vegas slot machine every 45 seconds . . . need we go on?

But while we're busy white-knuckling it, it can be easy to overlook how the younger members of our household are being affected by stress of their own. "We hold on to this idea that childhood is—or should be—a time of innocence and bliss and that children don't notice what is happening around them or really take it in," says Dawn Huebner, a psychologist and parent coach and the author of *Something Bad Happened*. "For the vast majority, that's not the case."

Statistics back that up. According to a 2011–12

study in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, more than 1 in 20 children ages 6 to 17 suffer from anxiety or depression—both conditions created or exacerbated by stress. An astounding 70% of teens surveyed by the Pew Research Center in early 2019 confirmed that they consider anxiety and depression a "major problem among their peers."

Not only are kids dealing with stress, but they're doing it without the benefit of perspective. "Their lack of life experience magnifies the intensity of their emotions," says Phyllis L. Fagell, a certified school counselor and the author of *Middle School Matters: The 10 Key Skills Kids Need to Thrive in Middle School and Beyond—and How Parents Can Help*. Because they haven't yet developed the ability to zoom out and acknowledge that "this too shall pass," they're more likely to catastrophize. The reason they're

Young children have not yet developed the ability to put their stress in context, which often leads to feelings of extreme anxiety.



acting like it's the end of the world is because that's precisely how it feels. "The part of our brain that develops last is the part that helps the most with coping and decision-making," says David J. Palmiter, a psychologist and the author of *Working Parents, Thriving Families*. "Kids—especially those suffering anxiety or depression—don't have the same capacity as adults to turn down their fight-or-flight response, so they convince themselves that a kitten is really a tiger. They're being flooded."

When we notice our kids struggling, the natural impulse is to swoop in and try to fix the situation by clearing the obstacles in their path. Alas, that lawn-mower approach doesn't do the trick. Firstly, it's impossible to solve every crisis—welcome to Whack-a-Mole—but more important, we're depriving our kids of an essential life skill. "A certain amount of stress is normal, and it's good for kids to learn how to manage and regulate it," says Mary Alvord, a psychologist and the author of *Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens*. Stress will invariably follow every one of us through life; the sooner we give our kids the tools to handle it, the better.

Stress that goes unchecked can lead to a mul-

titude of problems down the line. "Children with chronic stress or unaddressed anxiety suffer a host of physiological and psychological consequences," Huebner cautions. "They're in survival mode, on the constant lookout for potential danger. Their worlds shrink and they begin to miss out on the experiences that ultimately help children develop and grow."

SPOTTING THE SIGNS

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR KID IS STRESSED? Talking to your child about it isn't guaranteed to bear fruit. "Children can't always pinpoint what they're stressed about and are more likely to minimize the impact of specific stressors when asked about them directly," Huebner says. (Although that doesn't mean we should stop trying.) They might not have the language to put to their emotions or the desire to have them drawn out by Mom and Dad, which is why it's so vital to hang out together regularly one-on-one—beyond the distraction of devices or the frenzy of the morning commute—and keep your ears open. "If you're constantly running and gunning, your kids may be aware intellectually of how much you love them, but the quality of communication is not there,"



THROUGH THE YEARS: STRESS AT EVERY AGE AND STAGE

Preschool

Common Stressors: For infants and preschoolers, the majority of stress comes from not having their basic needs (food, sleep, affection) met. As tots mature, spending time with playmates can be an additional source of stress and conflict—"That's myyyy Thomas the Train!"—as can expectations to behave at home or in public.

Coping Strategies: Since food and sleep are such cornerstones, make sure your child is getting enough—and the right kind—of both. (And keep in mind that they're moving targets: a toddler might suddenly become the mayor of Tantrum City because he's famished from having a growth spurt.) When your child does behave well, "reinforce the behavior you want to see by giving a lot of very specific praise," Alvord says.

Palmiter says. Make an effort to demonstrate that you're calm, focused and ready to receive whatever they throw at you, even if it's a curveball. Says Palmiter, "One of the most common reasons that kids don't want to talk is because they don't want to stress out their parents."

In some cases, kids' stress will present physically, in the form of stomachaches or headaches. Frequently, clues will arrive in behavioral form, such as major mood shifts. "In children, stress is more likely to take the form of behavior regression like trouble eating, sleeping, separating from parents, or increased irritability or anxiety," Huebner says. "For example, needing to know 'the plan' at all times or needing to be reassured more than usual."

Other signs include social changes—acting withdrawn, having trouble with friends—and changes in academic performance. Is your son suddenly failing Spanish or being disruptive in the classroom? "Bad' behavior is virtually always a sign that a child is struggling with a feeling or situation beyond his ability to cope," Huebner says. On the other end of the spectrum, says Fagell, "an uptick in perfectionist behaviors can also be an indicator."

As a rule of thumb, if you're concerned your child has more stress than is manageable—or wondering if professional help is warranted—look for two factors: "The depth of the negative response, and how long it lasts," Palmiter says. "For most developmental transitions, whether it's going to kindergarten or learning to drive, the reactions don't interfere in a major way with life's obligations, and they usually go away within a week or two." Of course, children are often mercurial by nature, so the occasional tantrum or outsize reaction is no need for alarm, but if the intensity surpasses what is usual (or socially acceptable), it could be an indication that there's more going on. Explains Alvord, "If a kid is stressed out, it's normal to yell—it's not normal to hit somebody."

Need more intel? Turn to other adults in your child's orbit (teachers, coaches, the guidance counselor) as a resource. Don't focus solely on academic or performance issues but on the whole picture. Some questions to ask: Is my child an active participant or does she shrink away from taking risks? What's recess like for him? How does she manage in groups? Does she have friends? How does he respond when something doesn't go his way? Have there been any



Elementary School

Common Stressors:

Separating from parents, handling transitions and doing things that are unfamiliar or difficult all rank high. Explains Huebner, "Elementary

schoolers worry about 'messing up,' being singled out or facing a challenge they don't feel prepared for." They may also be dealing with disruptions at home. "Divorce rates

among parents get much higher at this stage, which means a lot of kids are suddenly going back and forth every week to different houses," Alvord says.

Coping Strategies:

Kids want to know what's coming at them, says Huebner, "so it's helpful to have routines and to preview changes." As various problems crop up, enlist kids for their ideas. "Involving a child in thinking up possible solutions, and then implementing one, is tremendously empowering," Huebner says. (If a new seating chart is causing agita, for example, brainstorm with your child about how to handle it.) For children who are fearful or anxious of bad things happening, encourage them to come up with soothing mini mantras ("Just because I'm scared doesn't mean I'm in danger"); Fagell recommends writing them down on "coping cards."

noticeable changes lately? Armed with the answers, you can begin coming up with a game plan together.

SOURCES OF STRESS

FIGURING OUT WHAT, EXACTLY, IS EATING YOUR kids is half the battle. Certain stressors are prevalent within age groups, but there are also more general culprits that impact kids from infancy through early adulthood.

The Mom and Dad Effect: Although it might sting to hear, there's no denying that our own relationship with stress has a trickle-down effect. "Kids are watching all the time, taking in how you resolve conflict, cope with stress, navigate daily challenges and interact with others," Fagell says. "If you're flinging insults or arguing about money, your child is listening."

On the flip side, we have the power to set a positive example. "Kids often have no idea how to make themselves feel better, so parents need to model and vocalize the strategies that work," Fagell says. "Try saying something like, 'I'm feeling overwhelmed, so I'm going to put the rest of this off until tomorrow and take a walk. It can wait.'"

Whatever issues may be plaguing the grown-ups under your roof, resist the urge to "shield" your kids from the truth. (News flash: No matter how covert you think you're being, they'll probably pick up on it anyway and assume the worst—or that it's their fault.) Address the elephant in the room in a developmentally appropriate way. "You shouldn't make dramatic statements like, 'Your father is leaving us!' or 'Fifteen children were just murdered at a school,'" Huebner says. "Instead, you might say, 'Dad and I both love you so much, and even though we've tried to work things out, we've decided that we need to start living apart from each other.' Or 'Something really sad happened. A person with a gun hurt people.' Then allow your children to ask questions and answer them using simple, noninflammatory, non-judgmental language."

The Outside World: Another trigger for stress is media exposure, in its myriad forms. "Kids today are dealing with a 24/7 news cycle, which means they may repeatedly see images of scary events," Fagell says. And those events, however remote, can be interpreted as extremely personal and terrifying. "Younger children can't discriminate between some-

Middle School

Common Stressors:

"Middle school is a whole new ball game: in addition to the hormones, this is when kids really develop an awareness of how they stack up to their peers socially, academically, athletically and physically," Fagell says. "Bullying peaks in middle school as kids jockey for a position in the hierarchy." This is also when homework gets cranked up and students transition from having one teacher to being in multiple classrooms. (And don't underestimate locker drama!)

Coping Strategies:

Create opportunities to connect by setting aside one hour a week of special



time with your child. "The criteria is no technology, no other humans and undivided attention. By giving them that time and space, they'll be much likelier to share with you if something is going on," Palmiter says. Kids

will likely need puberty demystified, although they probably won't want to learn about it from you. "Give them some good books like *My Changing Body* and say, 'We can talk about it when you're ready,'" Alvord advises.

Employ a similarly chill approach with heart-to-hearts, says Fagell. "Rather than saying, 'What stresses you out?' ask, 'What do you think most kids would say is the most stressful part of seventh grade?'"

thing that happened 2,000 miles away and the here and now,” Alvord says.

Even seemingly friendly fire can be hazardous. Social media provides endless opportunities to feel excluded, isolated or less than. “Kids barely get a breather from social drama, and they’re constantly subjected to curated images of unrealistic ideals,” Fagell says. For tweens and teens in particular, says Palmiter, “there’s a lot of pressure on kids to look successful and stack up to their peers.” To minimize the input, monitor your kids’ online activity and phone usage. “I advise parents to delay giving their child a phone as long as possible, preferably until they’re well into middle school, and to stay involved and spot-check their posts,” Fagell says. “I also recommend limiting use to less than two hours a day and designating a cutoff time in the evening, since a good deal of the misuse occurs late at night when kids are overtired or more impulsive.”

Too Much Work, Not Enough Play: Just like adults, kids today fall victim to the pitfalls of over-achieving and overprogramming. “I’ve seen kids worrying about their academic performance as young as second grade,” Fagell says. “They need unstructured

time to relax and play. Don’t schedule every minute of their week, and recognize when they need to unwind.” Psst: This is another chance to practice what you preach. “If you wait to meet your own emotional needs until after life’s others obligations are fulfilled, your kids will see that,” Palmiter says. “It will be woven into their unconscious marrow.”

As for that unwinding? Screens may be the preferred choice for kids of all ages, but they’re hardly optimal. “Watching TV or playing video games is so passive,” Alvord says. “Kids should be spending at least an hour outside a day getting exercise and having creative playtime.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

WHATEVER ISSUES YOUR FAMILY MIGHT BE facing, take comfort in the fact that you’re not in uncharted territory, and—although it may feel like it—stress certainly isn’t unique to our modern age. “Stress has always been a part of every generation, every year,” Alvord says. “Over time, we’ve just become more sophisticated in our awareness and acknowledgement of it.” In other words? Know better, do better. □

High School

Common Stressors:

A 2013 survey of high schoolers by the American Psychological Association found that the most common sources of stress were school (83%), getting into a good college or figuring out what to do after high school (69%) and their family’s finances (65%). Social anxiety looms large during this period as well. “If a teen sends a text and doesn’t get a response right away, she’ll jump to ‘My friend is mad at me’ in a matter of minutes,” Alvord says.

Coping Strategies:

Rather than trying to solve your teens’ crisis, validate it. “There will be room for trouble-shooting

later,” Palmiter says.

“First, they want to feel understood.” Another way to connect? Bust out some stories from the vault. “Kids can learn a lot from their parents’ pasts, including their screwups,” Palmiter says. And since insecurity about money is so prevalent, address it. Be mindful of your own attitude: Are you treating money as a source of great importance or angst? And although it’s perfectly reasonable to be budget-conscious, deeper fears should be assuaged. Finally, take stock of your kids’ school stress in order to steer them accordingly. “You need a realistic sense of your child’s academic abilities and aptitudes so

you can help them figure out how to play to their strengths,” Palmiter says.

Oh, and once your kids have successfully flown the nest? Don’t think you’re off the hook then—or ever. “My kids have gone off to college,

so now my wife and I are getting worried calls and texts from them about job interviews, internships and all the rest,” Palmiter says. “The parenting responsibilities just do not stop—and that’s a good outcome!”

