



Children & Stress: Helping Kids Cope

By award-winning author / stress-relief expert Susie Mantell

The best years of their lives? Today, kids know all about stress.

Remember when our biggest moral dilemma came at the end of Dr. Seuss's book, "The Cat in the Hat"? (*Should we tell mom what we did?*) Well, times have changed. Anyone raising children anywhere today knows that parenting--the process of providing safe passage for another human being from conception through adulthood in a 21st Century world-- is not for the faint of heart. And being a child can be very stressful these days too.

Secure Your Own Oxygen Mask Before Attempting to Help Others

Always remember how naturally intuitive children are. They don't miss much, and the day-to-day stress of their own worlds, as well as in the adults around them, take a toll. The lazy pace, the innocence and unstructured time enjoyed by previous generations are all too rare. Our children's world is a wondrous, albeit sometimes frightening place. The need for caring adults to listen and interpret events and explain in appropriate and comforting ways, is one of the greatest challenges to any parent. Family arguments, financial pressures, a hectic pace, adult depression or substance abuse, world events, and even entertainment are all processed through the filter of a child's perspective. The nightly news reminds us daily of the fragility of the human spirit, but also of its extraordinary resilience and potential to process, and to heal. The possibilities for technology in daily living, enhanced human potential, medical research and further space exploration promise knowledge and opportunities beyond even our bravest dreams. On the road to creating healthy ways to cope with your own stress levels in this ever-changing world, don't forget to fasten your kids' seatbelts too.

8 Tips for Reducing Stress in Young Children

1. Make daily quiet time to be alone with each child. Sacred time. No Interruptions. (*Hint: You will likely not "find" it, so you will probably need to create this time.*) Offer opportunities to talk about how things are going, to ask you question. Discuss and listen without recrimination. Starting this practice at age three or four sets the stage for later years, when it may be very difficult to pry that door open from either side. A few quiet minutes for airing little worries can prevent them from growing into big ones.

2. Whenever a child wants to talk, be ready to really listen--between the words, without judgment. If it's not a good time, schedule a date for an hour later. Be prepared for anything, and for not necessarily being able to fix it. Simply expressing worries often has a way of dissipating them.

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3. Children need to learn to self-soothe. Share some of your own 'stress successes' to demonstrate that everyone experiences, and copes with, stress. (e.g. *"Today I was so frustrated in a long line at the bank, so you know what I did? I opened my wallet and looked at your picture from the picnic last summer. Then I remembered how much fun that picnic was and how hard we all laughed. It cheered me right up! Would you like to go on a picnic this weekend?"* Or, *"Last night I had a little trouble sleeping, so I turned on the light and read for a few minutes until I got drowsy and I fell right back to sleep."*)
4. Encourage drawing, storytelling, creative play and physical activities that are healthy, safe, readily available ways to discharge anxiety or anger.
5. Make it your business to monitor and restrict your children 's TV, movie, music and Internet exposure. Their psychological safety is as much our responsibility as is fire-prevention.
6. Remember: We teach by example, intentionally or not. Much of how we cope with stress was learned watching our parents. (e.g. *shouting, drinking, smoking, slamming doors, isolation, violence.*) When you're tense, take a walk, talk things over, meditate, get hugged, have a good, cleansing cry and focus on the positive.
7. I think there really is no such thing as hiding a serious problem from children. Only trying to hide one. Even when you think children don't understand the stress in the household or your own life, they are likely sensing it on levels they may not be able to articulate. It's not nor fair, nor wise to share all adult problems with kids, but they probably sense when things are not right. Be on the lookout for a need for reassurance or to ask questions.
8. Perspective is an invaluable asset, and a wonderful gift to your children. Having spent over twenty years working with children and their families, my personal thought on, *"having a bad day"* is that very, very few entire days, start-to-finish, are completely and irreparably bad. Remind children that they may be having a really bad hour, or a really hard morning, but somewhere in this day some nice things will happen too. Then count the nice moments together.

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A Word About "The Wonder Years"

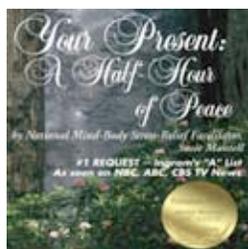
Every single tip suggested above for younger children applies for teens as well. I have a client who renegotiated her professional hours when her child entered middle school so that she could be available to carpool, help with homework, sports, etc. She said, *"In some ways they need my guidance even more now than when they were little."* An interesting thought. Teenagers wake up every day in a different body, and the developmental stress inherent in adolescence impacts many areas:

- Self-esteem
- Social pressure to conform, or not to
- Academic pressure
- Over/under-eating
- Acne, perspiration body-consciousness
- Awakening sexuality and hormonal swings
- Temptation to experiment or test limits
- Worry for personal safety at school
- Family conflicts , authority and autonomy issues

Closing Thought:

Take time to slow your children's world down and make it a lighter, gentler, safer place. Give them language to communicate their fears and questions and secret wishes. You do not have to solve every problem, nor do this important job alone. Many skilled professionals, seminars, articles and books can offer strategies for preventing, assessing and relieving stress in children. It is never too early, nor too late. Talking with people whose parenting you respect is a great way to share what works, and to avoid re-inventing the parenting wheel, which is, after all...pretty stressful. Nothing will take the place of your child's trust that you will be there, and are willing to help, no matter what.

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