

# How to Help Children and Teens Manage Their Stress

Stress in young people doesn't always look like stress in adults. But like adults, children and teens can find healthy ways to cope. Together, young people and their caregivers can learn to spot the signs of excess stress and, with the right tools, manage it.



## Recognize the Signs of Stress

Signs of stress in youth can show up in a number of ways:

- > **Irritability and anger:** Children don't always have the words to describe how they are feeling and sometimes tension bubbles over into a bad mood. Stressed-out kids and teens might be more short-tempered or argumentative than normal.
- > **Changes in behavior:** A young child who used to be a great listener is suddenly acting out. A once-active teen now doesn't want to leave the house. Sudden changes can be a sign that stress levels are high.
- > **Trouble sleeping:** A child or teen might complain of feeling tired all the time, sleep more than usual or have trouble falling asleep at night.
- > **Neglecting responsibilities:** If an adolescent suddenly drops the ball on homework, forgets obligations or starts procrastinating more than usual, stress might be a factor.
- > **Eating changes:** Eating too much or too little can both be reactions to stress.
- > **Getting sick more often:** Stress often shows up as physical symptoms. Children who feel stress often report headaches or stomachaches.

## Stress Management for Kids and Teens

Facing stressors is a fact of life, for children and adults. These strategies can help keep stress in check:

- > **Sleep well.** Sleep is essential for physical and emotional well-being. Experts recommend nine to 12 hours of sleep a night for 6- to 12-year olds. Teens need eight to 10 hours a night. Sleep needs to be a priority to keep stress in check. To protect shut-eye, limit screen use at night and avoid keeping digital devices in the bedroom.
- > **Exercise.** Physical activity is an essential stress reliever for people of all ages. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 60 minutes a day of activity for children ages 6 to 17.
- > **Talk it out.** Talking about stressful situations with a trusted adult can help kids and teens put things in perspective and find solutions.
- > **Make time for fun—and quiet.** Just like adults, kids and teens need time to do what brings them joy, whether that's unstructured time to play with building bricks or uninterrupted hours to practice music or art. Also, while some children thrive bouncing from one activity to the next, others need more down time. Find a healthy balance between favorite activities and free time.



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# How to Help Children and Teens Manage Their Stress *continued*

- > **Get outside.** Spending time in nature is an effective way to relieve stress and improve overall well-being.
- > **Write about it.** Research has found that expressing oneself in writing can help reduce mental distress and improve well-being. Some research has found, for example, that writing about positive feelings – such as the things you’re grateful for or proud of – can ease symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- > **Learn mindfulness.** In a study of a five-week mindfulness training program for 13- to 18-year-olds, researchers found that teens who learned mindfulness experienced significantly less mental distress than teens who did not. Mindfulness resources.
- > **Let kids be problem-solvers.** It’s natural to want to fix your child’s problems. But when caregivers swoop in to solve every little glitch, their children don’t have a chance to learn healthy coping skills. Let your children try to solve their low-stakes problems on their own, and they’ll gain confidence that they can deal with stressors and setbacks.
- > **Promote media literacy.** Today’s kids spend a lot of time online. Caregivers can help by teaching their children to be savvy digital consumers, and by limiting screen time.
- > **Combat negative thinking.** Children and teens can easily fall into the trap of negative thinking. When children use negative self-talk, though, don’t just disagree. Ask them to really think about whether what they say is true, or remind them of times they worked hard and improved. Learning to frame things positively will help them develop resilience to stress.

## How Caregivers Can Help

Caregivers have an important part to play, by adopting their own healthy habits and helping children and teens find stress-managing strategies. Some ways caregivers can take action:

- > **Model healthy coping.** Caregivers can talk with children about how they’ve thought about and dealt with their own stressful situations.

Adapted from [www.apa.org/topics/children-teens-stress](http://www.apa.org/topics/children-teens-stress)



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