

STRESS LESSONS

A parent's guide to stress
in young teens



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THE PSYCHOLOGY
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Our Mission:

The Psychology Foundation of Canada applies the best psychological knowledge to create practical programs helping children become confident and productive adults. For more information about our activities, please visit the website at www.psychologyfoundation.org

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Introduction

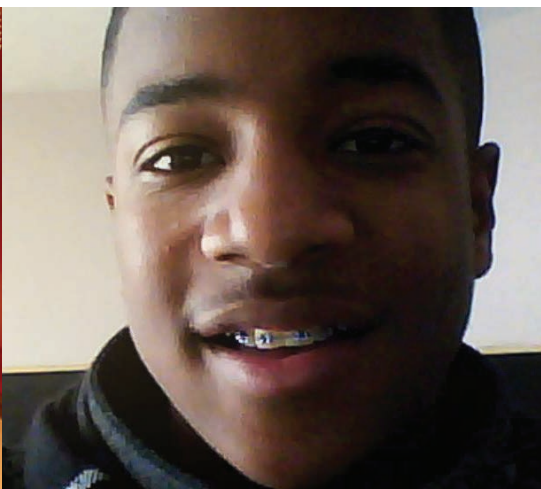
“When I get stressed out, it’s all in my gut. I have butterflies. Sometimes I feel like I’m gonna barf. I get home and my Mom wants to know how my day went. All I want to do is go to my room, listen to music and chill.”

“A lot of my friends have more money than I do. I’m always having to pretend that I’m not allowed to do something, or that I don’t want to go. But really, it’s that I don’t have the money.”

It’s a stressful world. In some ways, today’s families are under more stress than ever before – and that includes the kids.

That’s why The Psychology Foundation of Canada has developed **Kids Have Stress Too!** and **Stress Lessons** programs, a program to help children learn positive ways to cope with stress, and to give parents and teachers an understanding of the impact of stress on children and ideas for how they can help kids manage stress.

If children can learn to respond to stress in a healthy and constructive way early on, they will be more resilient and better able to cope with whatever life sends their way. In fact, successfully managing stressful situations or events enhances a child’s ability to cope – today and in the future.



Introducing STRESS LESSONS: From Stressed Out to Chilled Out Program for Grade 7-9 Classrooms

Stress Lessons is a free resource for Canadian educators and families. This research-based program was developed in collaboration with a range of Canadian experts including educators, parents, counsellors, stress experts and psychologists.

This booklet is specifically designed for parents of children in their early teens, or grades 7 to 9. In it you'll find some insight into why the early teen period can be a time of heightened stress; signs that your child might be struggling with too much stress; and ideas about how you can help.



What is **stress**?

“I had to do this presentation in class. It was just a little one, but I got nervous as I was waiting for my turn. I had cotton mouth so bad, I was sure I wasn’t going to be able to make a sound when I got up there.”

Stress is a normal, everyday occurrence. It’s our body’s response to feeling afraid, threatened, overworked, overstimulated or excited. While we often think of stress primarily as a feeling, it has a powerful physical component. Chemical reactions (such as the release of the hormone adrenaline) sharpen the senses, focus attention, quicken breathing, dilate blood vessels, increase heart rate, and tense muscles. This is the “fight or flight” response, and while it can save your life in an emergency, frequent or unrelieved high stress levels are not healthy.

A certain amount of stress is a good thing: it helps us feel alert, energized and interested in life. It can give you the extra energy to meet a deadline or the intensity to give your best performance in a play. But too much stress, particularly when we don’t have any control over it, can make people unhappy and can interfere with their ability to manage everyday tasks and challenges. Stress can also lead to health problems.



Stress in **Children**

Although we tend to think of stress as an adult concern, even young children experience stress. Some of it is normal, even helpful; but high levels of unrelieved stress can lead to behaviour problems and can interfere with a child's ability to function normally. When children are very young, parents play a big role in recognizing, relieving, and, sometimes, preventing children's stress. And because young children are so dependent and spend a lot of time with us, we are in a good position to help them manage their stress.

As children grow into the early teen years this becomes a little more challenging. Our children start spending more time with peers and less time with us. They also question our ideas and authority, so it feels like we have less influence and control over them. However, young teenagers still need their parents' love and guidance. A strong sense of connection to parents and family is key to helping children navigate the challenges of the teenage years. And as they become more independent, that connection enables us to help teens develop the awareness and skills they will need to manage their stress in adulthood.



Welcome back
to school.

Adolescent brain development and stress

"I play a lot of sports, and my parents encourage me—my dad jokes that being on lots of teams is a good way to stay out of trouble. But they also expect me to do well at school, and sometimes it's just too much. One week I had a basketball tournament, a swim team meet, and two big projects due at school. I felt like my head was going to explode. I didn't have time to hang out with my friends or relax at all. I really thought about quitting swimming after that."

Before we get into how to help young teenagers with stress, it's worth saying a few things about adolescent brain development. Recent advances in technology, including the use of magnetic resonance imaging, have enabled scientists to learn more about how the teenage brain works—and some of their findings are fascinating.



Did you know?

- A lot of important brain development occurs during the teen years, and the human brain is not fully mature until about age 25.
- In adolescence, important changes occur in parts of the brain that are responsible for impulse-control, judgment of risks and rewards, decision-making, planning, organization and processing of social and emotional information.
- Neuroscientists now say that puberty is a time of heightened sensitivity to stress because of the way changing hormone levels affect the brain.

What all that boils down to is that the early teen years are both an important time and a challenging time to help children with stress.



Why young teens feel **stressed**

“After grade 8 graduation we were all hanging around at a park. Some of the kids had brought some booze, and after a while I noticed that some guys and girls were pairing off—not just the kids who were already going out, but others. And then I got all stressed out and nervous about it. I was like, what if a boy asks me to go off with him and I don’t want to? What if nobody asks me and I’m the only one and everyone thinks I’m a loser?”

In focus groups and surveys, young teens are able to identify many causes of stress. Some you’ll probably remember from your own childhood. Others may be hitting kids earlier or more intensely, because of changes in our culture and lifestyle.

Causes of teen stress

- **Pressure to do well in school** (assignments, due dates, exams)
- **Peers:** pressure to fit in and be socially successful, shifting alliances and friendship groups, bullying, pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend or to try drugs and alcohol or join a gang
- **Parents:** family problems, conflict with parents about rules, parents passing along their stress, marital conflict, divorce and separation, getting along with step-parents and siblings in blended families
- **Overload:** busy schedules, taking on too many things at once, too many distractions
- **Earlier exposure to sexuality and sexualization:** pressures, questions, self-image
- **Worrying about physical appearance**
- **Not having as much money or material possessions as other kids**

What’s ironic is that two of biggest stressors for teens — peers and parents — are also their biggest potential sources of support with stress.



Parents: You can't live with them,
you can't live without them

"Some days I get home and I, like, really just need a break. But then my sister starts bugging me. I get mad at her and my Dad comes in and yells, 'Stop fighting!' But she's stressing me out and I need help with that, not somebody yelling at me."

Most of us can remember being stressed out by our parents' criticisms, rules, requirements and expectations. And we will most likely cause some stress for our own children in similar ways. That's OK. A certain amount of conflict between parents and teenagers is normal and, to some extent, inevitable. And it tends to really heat up when children are in their early teen years.

Parents should have expectations about the behaviour, habits and achievements of teenagers. But let's remember that they need our support, too. Supporting young teenagers with their stress not only helps them get through it and learn to manage stress on their own, it can actually improve their behaviour. Moodiness, irritability and some of the behaviours that parents want to correct can be caused, or at least, made worse, by stress.



Peers: The best of friends,
the worst of friends

“Ever since we moved to a small town, I’m one of the only Asian kids at school. Most of the kids are pretty nice, but there are a few who are real jerks. They call me “Apu” after the Simpsons character. It really embarrasses me and I don’t know how to deal with it.”

Most parents understand that teenagers place a lot of importance on fitting in with a peer group. We can all remember what that felt like, but we also remember that peers are not always supportive. At times they can be mean, judgmental and even downright nasty. Bullying, a major source of stress and distress for some teens, is primarily carried out by peers. Peers can also be the source of influences — attitudes, styles of dress or behaviours — that parents don’t always like.

However, positive peer relationships are also an important protective factor in the stress of young teenagers. In fact, social interaction and support from friends is one of the main ways that people deal with stress throughout life. As teenagers start to move farther away from their parents, the interaction they get from individual friends and as part of a group becomes important, not just for their happiness, but also for their ability to cope with everyday stressors.



Generation connected 24/7

You've probably noticed that young teenagers love to stay connected by Facebook, text messaging, cell phone calls and other media. That can have its upside. Being stuck at home with nothing to do on Friday night is easier to cope with if you can chat or play games online with friends. But, just as adults can have trouble getting a break from work when their cell phones are constantly on, kids can be stressed by never having downtime from the social pressures — especially if they are experiencing any kind of social conflict.

And some research suggests that over-exposure to electronic screens can actually cause a kind of sensory stress, which can contribute to underlying physiological stress in some children. Other research suggests that exposure to video screens too close to bedtime can interfere with sleep. So it's a good idea to place limits on kids' screen time, and to turn off cell phones and other electronic devices by bedtime. Admittedly, this can be challenging. One strategy used by some families is to restrict television, computer and game console use to the living areas of the house. Another is to designate overnight as the time for recharging cell phones — in the kitchen.



How parents can help

As parents, we want to help our children learn how to manage stress effectively and support them when they are struggling. And while young teens are becoming more independent, they definitely still need our help sometimes. Here are some suggestions:

Tune In to your own stress

“How you deal with your own stress is linked to how you help teens, how they experience stress, and how they learn to cope with their stress,” says Dr. Robin Alter, psychologist. Learning to deal constructively with your own stress can have a profound impact not only on you, but on the people around you.

Some points to consider:

- Your stress can impact your kids. A 2010 online survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that while two-thirds of parents believed their own stress had little or no effect on their children, 86 percent of tweens and teens said they were bothered by their parents’ stress.
- It is a lot harder to help someone else with their stress when you are feeling stressed yourself.
- When you model good stress management techniques, your children learn valuable life lessons.

So let your kids see you practising stress management. Look after yourself. Make sure you eat properly and get enough sleep and physical activity. Use leisure and vacation time to do activities that help you relax. When you are feeling stressed out, let your kids know how you feel, and what you’re going to do to help yourself feel better.



Maintain your parent-child relationship

Almost any positive influence you want to have on your teenager depends on a good relationship. Hopefully you have built and nurtured this relationship since your child was young. Once kids get to be teenagers, maintaining parent-child relationships may become more challenging because teens are pushing us away and spending less time with us.

So try to grab as many of the small opportunities to spend time together as you can. If there are activities you both enjoy, either as participants or fans, do them together. Eat meals as a family, as often as you can. Take your son or daughter out for lunch or on a special excursion. Some parents have great moments of connection with their teens while driving in the car.

Recognize the signs of stress

“Sometimes my parents don’t like my attitude. They say I’m ‘irritable.’ Well, they have no idea what stress I have to deal with at school some days.”

When people are over-stressed, it usually comes out through emotional symptoms, like angry outbursts and moodiness, and/or physical symptoms like headaches or stomach upset. In children and teens, an increase in troublesome behaviour may also be a signal of stress.

Other signs of stress:

- increased irritability, sadness, anxiety or panic
- trouble falling asleep
- undereating or overeating
- a pattern of overreacting to minor problems
- an increase in nervous habits like nail biting or hair twisting
- social withdrawal
- concentration or motivation problems

Of course, all of these symptoms can be caused by other factors. That’s why it is not always easy to detect stress in teens. And kids might not even identify their problems as stress. Sometimes it takes a little detective work on the part of parents to put the symptoms together with other clues from the child’s life that might suggest a stress problem.

Provide a healthy home base

A healthy diet, enough sleep and physical activity, the time and space to relax—these are the basic tools for coping with stress. Teens don't necessarily have the judgment, forethought or self-discipline to provide these things for themselves. That's part of why they still need parents!

Talk about stress

At this age, talking with kids about how stress feels, how people may react, and strategies to relieve stress will help them learn to identify their own stress and deal with it more actively.

Jasmine's son had been more irritable and argumentative since he'd turned 13. But just lately it had been even worse. This morning, when Jasmine reminded Josh to take his lunch to school, he snapped at her and slammed the door on his way out. "Is something worrying Josh?" Jasmine wondered.

Later that evening, as they were driving to Josh's band practice, Jasmine said, "How's it going, kiddo? I have the feeling something's bothering you these days." Josh ignored her and peered at his cell phone. But Jasmine continued, "I remember a few weeks ago I was stressed out by a deadline at work, and I know I was really snappy with you guys. Stress can have that effect on people. But once I made a plan for how to meet my deadlines, I felt better." Josh continued texting.

What Jasmine doesn't know yet, is that Josh is anxious that he won't be accepted into the special high school arts program that he has applied to. He's not ready to talk to his mom about it yet. But little conversations like this one should increase the chance that Josh will share his worry sometime in the future.

Sometimes it's hard to find the balance between asking a question that lets your child know you understand and are willing to talk, and jumping in with unwanted questions and advice. Teenagers aren't always ready to talk when we'd like them to. But we do need to pay attention to how they are doing, and be ready to listen when they are ready to talk.



Share coping strategies

Being stressed out doesn't feel very good. That can get in the way of dealing effectively with whatever's causing stress in the first place. This is why coping strategies are important. Young people need to learn that spending a bit of time helping yourself feel more relaxed is a useful strategy for dealing with stress.

Here are some stress-busting techniques your child might find helpful:

- Listen to music
- Get up and move around
- Get some fresh air—walk the dog or shoot some baskets
- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply
- Talk to a sympathetic and trustworthy friend
- Take a hot shower
- Write your worries down so they aren't all stuck in your head (sometimes helpful when you can't sleep)

What helps one person may not help another. Encourage your child to discover what helps him feel less stressed. Teenagers may not always seem receptive to the coping strategies we suggest, but if they are aware of the techniques they may try them out later on their own.



Gently challenge negative thoughts

"God, I'm such a loser." Kyla hunched up her shoulders, fighting back tears. "I can't go to school tomorrow. The whole school is laughing at me."

Kyla had had a solo song in the school musical, but her headset microphone had failed and the whole first verse was hardly audible. Then it blared on, startling her. She got out of time with the music and finished the song shakily, obviously rattled.

Kyla's dad put his arm around his daughter and gave her a squeeze. "C'mon, honey. It was a real shame what happened with the mike. But if that happened to your friend, you'd feel bad for her, wouldn't you?"

Kyla shrugged. Of course she would.

"Then don't you think your friends will stand behind you?"

Another shrug. "I guess. But everyone else will be laughing."

"Really?" Luc asked gently.

"YES!" snapped Kyla, and retreated to her room. But later that night she had a long talk with her best friend, Alyssa, and by the next morning she was ready to face school.



Help with problem-solving

Some stress is caused by problems that seem unsolvable. But often there are possible solutions, or at least ways to improve things. Parents do have more knowledge and experience than young teenagers, so it is very tempting to simply tell kids what we think they should do. And there may be times when you have to do that, or even take action yourself. But children learn more about problem-solving when they are active participants. You may not always agree with your child's ideas, but listen to them anyway. Your child will feel respected and will gradually learn the important life-skill of problem-solving.

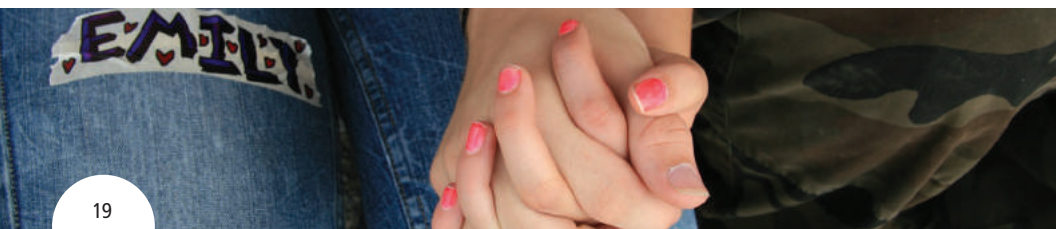
Here are some problem-solving strategies to share with your child:

Can the Situation be changed? Help your child figure out what aspects of the stressful situation she can control. If something can be changed, the answer is problem-solving. When it can't, coping becomes the appropriate strategy.

Break it into small chunks. Sometimes a task or challenge causes stress because it seems so big that it becomes overwhelming. Breaking it into smaller chunks (with a timeline if needed) can make it more manageable.

Consider alternatives. Remember our student who felt overwhelmed by his sports and school commitments and unhappy about missing time with his friends? He considered dropping a sport — which could be a good decision, if he's truly overloaded with activities. But there might be other possibilities, such as going to speak with a teacher **before** a very busy sports week to request an extension.

Make a plan. With any problem, it helps to have a plan of action. What exactly needs to be done? Who needs to be involved? What preparation do you need to do? What's the first step?



Provide practical support

When you're under stress at work, don't you appreciate it when a colleague brings you a coffee or offers to handle a small task for you? Small caring gestures like this are not only practical, they also provide emotional support that can help people solve problems or hold up under pressure.

When kids are going through a stressful time, our small gestures of support can really help.

You might:

- Temporarily reduce their home responsibilities, like chores, so they can devote more time to a school assignment or studying
- Bring them a snack or a cup of tea
- Offer to drive them to school or activities when they are pressed for time



When it's too much to handle

It's not always easy to know when your teen's stress levels are beyond what do-it-yourself coping strategies and problem-solving can manage — especially since some kids will insist they don't need help even when they clearly do. Even though it's important to allow young teens space to handle things on their own when they can, when it comes to serious problems they still need parents to step in for them. Here are some things to consider:

- If your child is experiencing ongoing bullying or having serious difficulties with schoolwork, the school needs to be involved. You will probably have to initiate the first meeting, and you may have to stay involved as your child's advocate.
- Increasing numbers of children and teens are suffering from mental health issues like anxiety and depression. If your child's stress is so heavy it is impacting his ability to function well and enjoy life, it's a good idea to seek outside help. Your family doctor can refer you to a psychologist or counsellor.





They won't always listen (but **we** should)

We've said it before and we'll say it again. Young teenagers are not always receptive to parents' ideas and solutions, even when our ideas are very good. We can all think of times when we felt stressed and it seemed like everybody we knew was trying to tell us what to do. It doesn't always help; in fact, arguing about the solution to stress can be stressful itself! So sometimes we need to back off and give kids time to recover from the in-the-moment stress they are feeling.

As parents, our goal is not to try to take away all of our children's stress. But by tuning into preteen stress we can reduce some of it, and we can also help our children develop realistic and positive stress management skills that will help them throughout their lives.

