

Talking With Your Children About Stress



According to the American Psychological Association’s annual **Stress in America** survey, many Americans—both adults and youth—report experiencing *significant* stress. While some stress is part of everyday life and sometimes helps motivate us to take action, adults can more readily identify feelings and causes of significant stress, and consider ways to manage it. Young people, however, may not recognize signs of stress or know how to respond and cope effectively. Parents can offer valuable assistance and provide empathy and understanding. By knowing what to listen to and watch for and by seeking out opportunities to engage in conversation with children of all ages, parents can help their children to better handle life challenges. APA offers the following tips on talking with your children about stress:

BE AVAILABLE

- Notice times when your kids are most likely to talk—for example, at bedtime, before dinner, in the car—and be fully available to just listen.
- Start the conversation; it lets your kids know you care about what’s happening in their lives. Find time each week for a one-on-one activity with each child, and avoid scheduling other activities during that time.
- Learn about your children’s interests—for example, favorite music and activities—and show interest in them.
- Initiate conversations by sharing what you have been thinking about, or what other kids may be thinking about, rather than beginning a conversation with a question.



LISTEN ACTIVELY

- When your children are talking about concerns, stop whatever you are doing and listen.
- Express interest in what they are saying without being intrusive.
- Listen to their point of view, even if it’s difficult to hear.
- Let them complete their point before you respond.
- Repeat what you heard them say to ensure that you understand them correctly.
- Realize that your children may test you by telling you a small part of what is bothering them. Listen carefully to what they say, encourage them to talk and they may share the rest of the story, especially if you are empathic and avoid teaching early in the discussion.



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RESPOND THOUGHTFULLY

- Soften strong reactions—kids will tune you out if you appear angry, defensive or judgmental.
- Express your opinion without minimizing theirs—acknowledge that it's healthy to disagree sometimes.
- Resist arguing about who is right. Instead say, "I know you disagree with me, but this is what I think."
- Focus on your child's feelings rather than your own during your conversation.
- Ask your children what they may want or need from you in a conversation, such as advice, help in dealing with feelings or assistance in solving a problem.

CONSIDER

- Kids learn by watching their parents. Most often, they will follow your lead in how they deal with anger, solve problems and work through difficult feelings. Help your kids to adopt healthy coping strategies by modeling positive behaviors.
- Engage the family in stress-reducing activities, such as taking a family walk, riding bikes or dancing together.
- Young children may express feeling of stress or worry in their play. Pay attention to themes in their conversations and activities to gain a good sense of their concerns. Teens and older children are often more involved with peers than family as part of developing their own identity. Significant avoidance of parents, however, may be a sign that a teen is distressed and may need assistance.
- Kids learn from their own choices. As long as the consequences are not dangerous to themselves or others, don't feel you have to step in each time.
- Shielding children from serious causes of stress or anxiety, such as unemployment, a parent's marital problems or an illness in the family, can worsen a child's anxiety because children commonly assume a worst-case scenario. Help by providing age-appropriate information.

SEEK ADDITIONAL HELP

If you have concerns that your child is experiencing considerable stress and the tips are not sufficient, seek advice from a licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist. Psychologists have specific training that can help both you and your child successfully manage overwhelming stress. For additional information on stress and lifestyle and behaviors, visit [APA Help Center](#) and follow [@apahelpcenter](#) on Twitter.



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This tip sheet was made possible with help from APA members Mary Alvord, PhD, and David J. Palmiter, Jr., PhD, ABPP.

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