

**Helping children and adolescents cope  
with family stress:**

**A handbook for parents**



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## What stresses children and adolescents?

When psychologists first began to study how people cope with stress, they focused their attention on traumatic events like hurricanes, losing a loved one, or having an operation. While those kinds of experiences are certainly stressful when they happen,, they happen only rarely. The stresses that most of us experience, adults and youth alike, are the day-to-day “hassles” of life. Daily hassles are harder to avoid, harder to change, and have a long-lasting impact. So, it is not surprising that when children and adolescents are asked to describe the things that cause them stress, at the top of their list are daily worries such as pressure to succeed, trying to navigate problems in their relationships with peers, and arguments between their parents.

## Do conflicts between parents harm children?

Conflict is an inevitable part of family life—all people who live together have trouble getting along sometimes. Conflict between parents is surely one of the “daily hassles” of childhood. However, not all youth who are exposed to arguments between their parents develop emotional and behavioral problems.

Since conflict between parents occurs in all families, it is not the fact that parents argue that stresses their children. Whether or not youth are stressed depends on how their parents quarrel. Of course youth find fights between their parents that are physically or verbally **violent** to be the most worrisome. But there are other differences as well. Children as young as 5 years old can detect whether or not their parents have **resolved** their arguments, and they are most distressed when their parents remain with one another. Youth also are more stressed when they feel **involved** in their parents' quarrels—this can happen when arguments take place in front of the child, when parents

argue about the child or childrearing issues, or if parents air grievances about one another to their child. On the other hand, youth are less upset by arguments when their parents provide a simple, matter-of-fact **explanation** for the argument, especially one which explains that the argument is not the child's fault (for example, “Your mom and I are having trouble agreeing about something. It's just between the two of us grown-ups, and isn't because of anything you did.”)

Why do youth seem less stressed when they understand that their parents' arguments aren't to do with them? One of the problematic interpretations that some children and adolescents make is to **self-blame**, to assume that they are the cause of the problem. Therefore, in the absence of any other explanation, some children will end up blaming themselves for causing their parents' arguments, and will believe that they are responsible for solving the problem. Blaming yourself for a stressful situation that is not your fault is bound to lead to some unhappiness and worry.

## How do children and adolescents cope with family stress?

There are many different ways that children and adolescents can cope with stress, and we are only just learning why a particular youth prefers one strategy more than another. Youths' coping strategies fall into categories that are very similar to the ones adults use. The first is called **problem-focused** coping, and it refers to taking action to change the situation (for example, telling someone to stop bothering us, getting an authority figure to come help, seeking information that will tell us how to fix the problem). The second kind of coping is **emotion-focused**, designed to change our reaction to the situation and reduce how much we are feeling stressed (for example, thinking about something else for a while, taking a walk, getting a hug, looking on the bright side). Sometimes a third category called **maladaptive** coping is included. These

are things people do in an attempt to make themselves feel better, but that actually make things worse in the long run (for example, venting frustration by yelling at someone, or taking it out on ourselves through overeating, self-starvation, or substance abuse).

The way we respond to stress can either help us or hinder us, depending on how well our coping strategy fits the situation. For example, problem-focused coping works best when the situation is one over which you actually have some control, so that your actions will be effective. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, works best when the situation is unchangeable and the only thing you can do is adapt, adjust your outlook, or get some distance. If you can make the situation better, taking action is preferred. But trying to change a problem you cannot solve will be frustrating, leaving you feeling even more angry and ineffective. So, if children are trying to solve problems over which they have no control, such as their parents' marital conflicts, they may end up feeling “caught in the middle” and even more stressed. When the situation isn't under our control, therefore, the best way to ease our stress may be to switch to an emotion-focused strategy that allows us to be calm and face the problem with a better outlook.

### **How can parents tell if a youth is feeling stressed?**

Children and adolescents how distress in many different ways, and each youth is unique. No one behavior or emotion is going to describe every young person. And as a parent you are the best “expert” on your child's feelings. However, if your youth is difficult to read, there are some signs to look for that might suggest it is time to sit down with your child and talk about whether she or he is stressed. Sleeplessness, nightmares, irritability, sudden loss of skills or developmental accomplishments (such as toilet-training), lack of interest

in activities that used to be a source of pleasure and achievement—these can all be signs of stress in youth.

Youth often find it difficult to put their feelings into words—they may be more likely to show their state of mind through their behavior. There are two very different ways in which youth might show they are upset. One way is to “act out” their feelings through misbehavior, getting into trouble, or expressing anger, called **externalizing**. Acting up is one way youth can call attention to themselves and get help from an adult. Other youth take the world on their shoulders, turning all their thoughts and worries inward—these are youth who become quiet, tense, or preoccupied, and may even act overly “good” as a way of trying to make things better. This is called **internalizing**. Youth who hold their feelings inside might not attract the attention of the adults around them who would be able to help them cope.

If you see these kinds of behaviour or mood changes in your child, or if you find that you are worried about your child but are not sure whether there is a problem, talk it over with someone whose opinion you trust: a family member, another parent, your child's teacher, a physician, or a mental health professional.

### **What can parents do when a youth is stressed?**

The best place to start is to listen, and listen actively. Help your youth put into his or her own words the feelings and thoughts that are troubling him or her. Youth may have fears they are afraid to express, and need an adults' permission that it is okay to ask their questions. Youths' fears may be groundless, for example when they misinterpret a fight between parents as meaning that they are getting a divorce. It will help to hear your reassurance that the situation is not as scary as they feared, and your explanation about the true state of affairs. But other times, because children are very perceptive, they realize that a problem

exists even when their parents didn't think the children are even aware of it. If there is a real problem, for example, if parents are going to divorce, the best coping tools that kids can have are **information**, **preparation**, and **emotional support**. Children and adolescents benefit from being allowed to prepare themselves ahead of time when difficult transitions lie ahead. They need to explore their ideas and worries by talking about them, to practice and test their understanding by asking the same questions over and over again, and to anticipate each step coming up before it is time to take it.

### How can parents teach effective coping?

**1. Provide a supportive relationship.** Many researchers have found that the single best buffer against stress in childhood is having at least one positive relationship with an adult—someone, whether a parent, an aunt or uncle, a neighbor, or a teacher, who provides consistent warmth, encouragement, and support.

**2. Help youth recognize when they are stressed.** Helping a young person to recognize the emotional “signals” of his or her own stress reaction and put those feelings into words can be the first step to better coping. Talking about feelings is important in itself. Sometimes adults and youth have emotional reactions that get in the way of solving problems—nonetheless, it helps to have others listen and accept the way we feel. And, youth who are aware of their own feelings will be more able to empathize with other people, and will be better able to reach out for emotional support—and to give it, as well.

**3. Help youth anticipate upcoming stressful events.** There are many transitions and new demands placed on children and adolescents as they are growing up. Entering a higher grade level, making friends at a

new school, beginning to date—all are minor stresses that youth will cope with best if they are able to prepare for them. Not only that, but having coped well with something in the past, even if it was only a small challenge, can increase youths’ confidence and general coping ability. **Belief** in our own ability to handle things may be one of the single best coping strategies we have.

**4. Problem-solve with your child.** Youth sometimes wonder how adults seem to know just what to do when a problem comes along. You can help your child to learn that good ideas don't just fall from the sky, but rather come from thinking through problems, brain-storming about possible solutions, and then deciding which response would work best. Sit down with your child to talk about stressful situations, and problem-solve together about solutions. You can even role-play with your child to “try out” different strategies and to practice new skills, like being assertive, or figuring out how to understand another person’s perspective. Teach your child to stop and ask him/herself: “What is the problem here? How does it make me feel? Is there anything I can do to make the **problem** better? Is there anything I can do to help myself **feel** better?” Youth cope best if they can come up with some action to take when things go wrong—even if it is just to take a walk around the block.

**5. Consider your child's individual personality and age level.** Youth will learn most easily the coping strategies that fit with their own interpersonal “style.” For instance, some youth are shy, and will always find it hard to be assertive and outspoken. Other youth find it very difficult to adjust to change. If you recognize your child's “comfort zones” about relationships, you can help him or her to develop problem-solving strategies that he or she can use with confidence. Youths’ abilities and reasoning processes change with age, as well. For example, children only develop understanding of logical cause-and-effect relationships in the early years of elementary school, so younger children

may need clear feedback about how their actions affect themselves and others. In general, younger children will need more direct support, structure, and coaching from adults. Younger children don't always have a clear sense of the difference between reality versus fantasy—for instance, they may need reassurance that angry thoughts they have toward someone don't actually harm that person or make them disappear. In turn, adolescents often are striving to “be in their own driver’s seats” and solve problems for themselves—help from parents who place themselves in the role of mutual problem-solver or supportive listener, rather than “expert” advice-giver, might be better received by teenagers.

**6. Teach constructive thinking.** Help your child to think positively even about the things that don't go well. Teach your child to re-label “failures” as opportunities to try again and do even better, to look at “problems” as challenges. Remind youth that there is a long future ahead (six year-olds don't know how to do the things that sixteen year-olds can do, but someday they will!)

**7. Enhance your child's overall resilience.** It would be difficult to be prepared for each and every curve that life will throw in our paths, and no parent could protect a child from ever experiencing stress or disappointment. Instead, parents can help children to approach the challenges ahead with a general ability to “bounce back”. Ways to bolster resilience and self-efficacy include communicating your confidence in your child, making sure children notice and give themselves credit for the ways they handle things well no matter how small these triumphs may be, and helping children to discover a talent, learn a skill, or develop a special interest that gives them a sense of effectiveness and joy in life. Good relationships with peers will also contribute to children's overall well-being and stress-resistance. Providing your child with the opportunity to interact with other youth

and develop social skills through participation in sports, scouts, or other groups can provide a long-lasting stress “innoculation.”

**8. Role-model adaptive coping.** Parents are important role models for their children. Although there are many lessons you can teach your children in words, they will be influenced more by what they actually *see* you doing than by what they hear you say. Sometimes when youth are dealing with stress in nonconstructive ways, whether by taking it out on others or being too hard on themselves, they are mirroring the behavior they see in the adults around them. If you find your children are coping poorly with stress in the same way that you have difficulty dealing with it, this may be a message that the whole family would benefit from learning some new coping methods—perhaps you can lead the way.

**9. Keep kids' jobs “kid-sized.”** When family stress revolves around adult worries—paying the bills, problems with in-laws, marital conflict—children’s desire to help may cause them to try to attack problems that are not kid-sized. Acknowledge your child’s good intentions, but assert yourself when youth try to do something that is not their job (“Thank you for wanting to help, but this is a grown-up issue for your dad and me to sort out.”) and provide explanations that clarify that kids are not to blame (“It’s not because of anything you did.”) When appropriate, give youth constructive tasks they can perform (“It would help me if you’d put your own laundry away.”)

**10. Take care of yourself** as well as your family. Parents are often overworked and stressed themselves, attempting to meet the demands of homelife, work, and making a go of it in these tough financial times. Tune into yourself—your own level of stress, your health, and your general well-being. Being good to yourself, physically and emotionally, will have a positive and long-lasting influence on your children's self-esteem and ability to cope with the stresses of life.

## Resources

There are a number of mental health centers in the Intermountain Area with therapists trained to help youth, parents, and families. Places to contact include:

University of Utah Pediatric Behavioral Health Clinic	801-313-7711
Primary Children's Center for Counseling	801-265-3000
Salt Lake County Division of Youth Services	801-269-7500
Wasatch Youth Support Adolescent Treatment Center	801-969-3307
Utah Center for Evidence-Based Treatment	801-419-0139
University Neuropsychiatric Institute	801-585-1212
Draper Psychological Services	801-619-3569

## Readings

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