



Parent and Caregiver Guide

“There’s a wonderful and powerful window of time developmentally – between ages 10 and 12, before the teenage years – where [parents and teachers [and other caring adults] can make a lifelong difference in helping children grow up to be emotionally healthy and well.

It’s an opportunity to help children learn problem solving, stress management skills and become more self-aware – and this is a gift that can help them today and for the rest of their lives.” – Robin C. Alter, Ph.D., Child Psychologist, author of *Anxiety and the Gift of Imagination*, panelist, OPA, CPA, APA Member, CPF Trustee.

Experts say stress can be contagious.

While some stress is normal and can even be useful, today’s families now face more stress than ever before. In addition to everyday stresses, school can be stressful for children too.

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. Parents, caregivers, teachers and others in the helping professions are often in the best position to teach children life-long stress management skills, and there are many strategies that can help.

In fact, successfully managing stressful situations or events enhances a child’s ability to cope today and in the future.

Whether a child is feeling stress from a normal everyday stressor or from something out of the ordinary, you can help him or her cope with stress reactions by showing them effective stress management techniques

Introducing the Kids Have Stress Too! Toolkit

Kids Have Stress Too! is a resource for parents, teachers, counsellors, and other caring adults in Canada who work with children ages 9-12. It aims to help children learn how to manage stress today, and for the rest of their lives. The research-based program was developed in collaboration with a range of Canadian experts including educators, parents, counselors, stress experts and psychologists.

What will you find in this Parent Guide:

- Who developed this program?
- What is stress?
- How to recognize it in children
- What you can do at home to help children deal with stress
- When is stress too much?
- Stress can be contagious – dealing with your own stress
- Stress Lessons in the classroom



Who developed this program?

Stress Lessons was created by Strong Minds Strong Kids in collaboration with Pfizer Canada.

Strong Minds Strong Kids, Psychology Canada is a national registered charity dedicated to sharing psychological knowledge. SMSKPC develops, promotes and supports programs that help educate people in Canada on how to understand and manage stress. Strong Minds Strong Kids, Psychology Canada also offers an acclaimed series of stress management resources for younger children that can be accessed online at StrongMindsStrongKids.org

Pfizer Canada's More than Medication preventative health and wellness program reflects Pfizer's belief that it takes more than medication to be truly healthy.

The More than Medication wellness initiative provides made-in-Canada health and well-being tools, information and inspiration.

Kids Have Stress Too! Advisory Panel

This resource has been developed with the help of the following experts:

Dr. Robin Alter

An experienced child and family psychologist with over 30 years experience who specializes in childhood anxiety and stress. Dr. Alter's first book: *Anxiety and the Gift of Imagination* is now available. Strong Minds Strong Kids thanks Dr. Alter for generously donating her ideas and suggestions on classroom activities for this initiative.

Eli Bay

Eli Bay has been helping Canadians relieve and manage stress for over 30 years, as the Founder and President of The Relaxation Response Institute in Toronto.

Marietta Bloch

Marietta is the Director of Education Services at Let's Talk Science, a national charitable organization dedicated to improving science literacy through leadership, innovative learning programs, research and advocacy. She was a founding co-chair of the Science & Technology Awareness Network.

Judy Hills

Former Executive Director of The Psychology Foundation of Canada, Judy, a former teacher, has worked in the not for profit sector for many years and served on the Advisory Board for CIHR Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction.

Dr. Bill Hogarth

Dr. Hogarth is the President of Education, Research and Development Institute (ERDI) Canada – and a former Director of Education for the York Region District School Board.

Charlotte Holtan

A retired educator, Charlotte was instrumental in the founding of Victoria's non-profit Community Options for Children and Families Society.

Heidi Lenet

Montreal Physical Education teacher, Heidi Lenet, is dedicated to keeping kids active and inspiring them to make healthier choices.

Patrick Niiya

For more than a decade, Patrick has been inspiring grade six Montreal-area students with his energetic and innovative teaching style.

Catherine Willinsky

A program consultant with Strong Minds Strong Kids, Psychology Canada, Catherine works in mental health promotion in schools and has worked extensively with the *Kids Have Stress Too!* program.

With special thanks to:

Dr. David Posen Family Physician, Stress Management and Lifestyle Counsellor

Denise Marek Stress/Anxiety Expert

Yvonne Clarke Family Therapy and Counsellor, McGill University Health Centre

Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt PhD, Relationship & youth Stressors, Teen bullying and victimization

Kathy Jurgens Canadian Mental Health Association

Angela Shim Nutritionist, Vitality Coach



What is stress?

Stress is an automatic reaction that happens in your body when there is a perceived threat. The release of chemicals (such as the hormone adrenaline) sharpens your senses, focuses attention, quickens breathing, dilates blood vessels, increases heart rate, and tenses your muscles. This is the “fight or flight” response that prepares us to act quickly to tackle or avoid danger.

Stress is a normal, everyday occurrence. We tend to think of stress as a bad thing, but a certain amount of it actually helps us feel alert, energized and interested in life. However, too much stress, particularly when we don't have any control over it, can make people unhappy and can interfere with their ability to respond to everyday tasks and challenges. Stress can also lead to health problems.

Stress is like a guitar string

Just like a violin or guitar string needs to have the right amount of stress or tension to make music, we all need some stress in our lives to get us moving and motivate us to be our best. But if the string is stretched too tightly,

it will break. Human beings operate similarly to the guitar string: we need just the right amount of stress to perform well and feel good, but too much stress can make us snap!

Taking control of stress

Simple stress relievers include thinking more optimistically, talking to a trusted adult, taking a breather or doing something active, like running or playing basketball.

To help children in your care learn more about the stress response, watch a short video with them called What is Stress at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnrqG4BBsOA>

Dr. Alter suggests encouraging children to talk about what they were most surprised to learn about stress — and how it affects our bodies and minds.

How to recognize it in children

It's not always easy to recognize that when kids are stressed out, short-term behavioural changes, such as mood swings, acting out, changes in sleep patterns, can be indications. Some kids experience physical effects, including stomachaches and headaches. Others have trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork. Still others become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone.

To recognize possible signs of stress, anxiety and distress in a child, be on the lookout for physical clues:

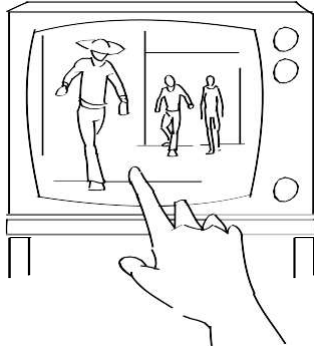
- whining
- poor listening
- crying
- nail biting
- day dreaming
- fighting with friends and family
- being overly cautious
- poor school performance
- lack of appetite or eating more than usual
- tense muscles
- headaches or stomach-aches
- being cold
- disturbed sleep
- poor concentration
- forgetfulness
- difficulty problem-solving
- being easily distracted
- confusion



Stress Lessons Activities for Parents and Caregivers

Learning to manage stress can be fun for both you and the your child you are helping. We've created several activities that you can do together to help cope with and manage stress.

Point it Out

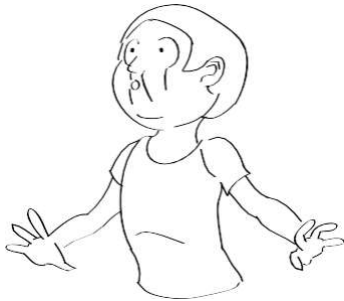


Movie time, story time and even just watching regular TV can be a great opportunity for a child to see how people react to stress in different ways and develop self-awareness and reflection.

How it works: During a movie, television show or story time, ask the child to point out moments when the characters are faced with stress. Ask them to think about how they managed their stress and how they might have handled things differently.

Why it works: This activity is an effective way for caring adults to start a discussion and encourage children to become more self-aware and reflective.

Deep Breathing



Deep breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in the body. This is because when you breathe deeply it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax.

How it works: Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Nm-RCwQy2E> to watch a short video with the child on deep breathing. Together, you'll learn basic deep breathing techniques from stress expert Eli Bay.

Why it works: When children practice deep breathing regularly, they learn that it's a tool they can use anytime, anywhere.

Worry Box



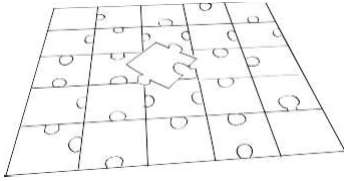
This exercise will help a child think about their worries and fears in a realistic, productive way that can lessen stress and anxiety.

How it works: Invite the child to create a Worry Box out of an old shoebox or envelope. Decorate and personalize it together. Encourage the child to write down their worries and fears and place them in the box anytime they're feeling stressed.

Why it works: The Worry Box is a great conversation starter that will help you know what your child is concerned about so that you can provide them with support.

"Just talking about their concerns with their parents or a trusted adult helps children process anxiety and stress in a healthy way," explains Dr. Alter.

Puzzle Solvers

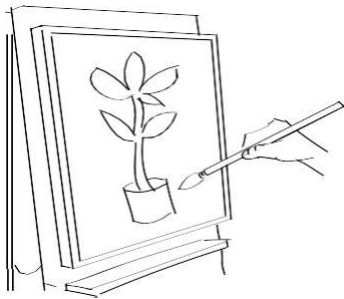


This exercise is designed to help the child learn problem solving skills. It will help the child to think critically about different kinds of problems and break them down into smaller pieces that can be managed proactively.

How it works: Sit down with the child and fill in the Puzzle Solving Activity Sheet found at the end of this guide. Use it as a tool to talk about issues, build consensus and explore positive solutions to the child's worries.

Why it works: Problem solving can have a number of benefits including: better success at school, higher self-esteem, better relationships, and a happier life. This exercise teaches the child to break down problems into smaller, more manageable steps to figure out proactive solutions to their concerns.

Express Yourself



Self-expression is an important tool in learning how to recognize and manage stress. Self expression allows people to distinguish themselves from others, to reflect their own needs and beliefs and validate their own self concepts. This exercise will help you encourage the child to regularly explore journaling, drawing, art and music as a means of busting stress.

How it works: Encourage the child to set aside time everyday to explore various means of self-expression. They can write in a journal, play or listen to music, or draw. Create an Expression Wall where they can feature their works of art.

Why it works: Art, music, journaling and even role playing are safe, concrete ways to encourage the child to express more complex emotions and feelings.

Additional Tips and Exercises:

Get active: Physical activity is great way for a child to manage stress. Encourage them to play sports, swim, dance or anything else that gets them moving.

Connect: One of the best ways to show support is by making time for a child because contact is a great stress reliever. Spend time throwing a Frisbee, enjoying a picnic, volunteering together or just hanging out and connecting.

Hug it out: Show the child that you love them with words (and hugs and kisses, if appropriate). Play and laugh together.

Laugh and have fun: A good sense of humor can't cure all ailments, but it can help a child feel better because laughter actually causes physical changes in our bodies that help to relieve stress. Laughter fires up and then cools down the stress response and increases our heart rate and blood pressure, producing a good, relaxed feeling.

When does stress become too much?

Some stressors in a child's life may take the form of "daily hassles" that are typically short-lived. Examples include having to adjust to a new classroom schedule, meeting new people or feeling pressure to do well on a test.

Be attentive and seek professional help if:

- Stress is interfering in the child's life, and stopping them from doing the things that are important
- The child is constantly seeking abnormal amounts of reassurance
- The child is not coping well with daily stressors
- You are a parent and would like to discuss parenting strategies and ways of increasing your child's resilience

Stress is contagious: Dealing with your own stress

Dealing with stress can be difficult. However, the most important thing to remember is that you are only in control of your own actions and reactions. And learning to deal with your own stress properly can have a profound impact on not only you, but those close to you too.

If children see parents, teachers and other caring adults in their lives using stress-reduction tools in tense moments, they will learn by example.

Want to know how stressed you are? Take our quick quiz. Answer each of the following statements with 'yes' or 'no'.

- I feel nervous or anxious a lot.
- I take quick, shallow breaths.
- I suffer from depression and/or fatigue.
- I have chronic tension in parts of my body (raised shoulders, etc)
- I have on-going health problems (hives, headaches, indigestion, etc).

If you answered 'yes' to three or more, stress management techniques might be beneficial to you.

Dealing with your own stress in a healthy manner will have a positive effect on the people around you, especially the kids you are helping.

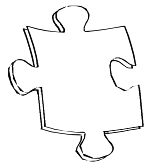
For more information about effective ways of dealing with stress, and about *Kids Have Stress Too!* go to www.StrongMindsStrongKids.org



Activity Sheet

Puzzle Solvers

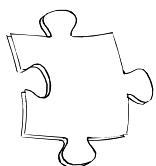
Puzzle Planner



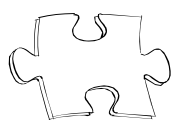
What problem do I want to work on?



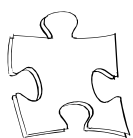
How does the problem make me feel?



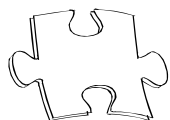
What do I have control over about the problem?



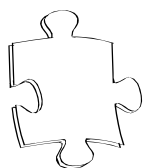
What don't I have control over about the problem?



What's the worst thing that could happen?



What's the best?

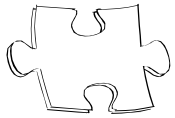


What do I think will REALLY happen?

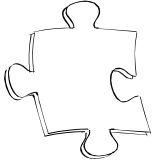
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Puzzle Planner (cont'd)



What are some ways I can try to solve the problem?



Which solution do I want to try?



Who can I ask for help – or talk to – about this problem?



How did it work out?

My Plan:

What are three things that I can do immediately to help me learn more about – or start to – solve this problem?

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Remember:

You don't have to solve every problem on your own. Sometimes you need help. And if you do, talking about your feelings can be the first step toward getting it.