

## What Kids Say About: Handling Stress



### Top 3 things that cause 9-13 year olds the most stress?:

1. Grades, School, and Homework (36%)
2. Family (32%)
3. Friends, Peers, Gossip, and Teasing (21%)

(National KidsPoll of 875 children 9-13 year olds)

### Coping strategies kids said they use the most (they could give more than one response):

- 52% play or do something active
- 44% listen to music
- 42% watch TV or play a video game
- 30% talk to a friend**
- 29% try not to think about it
- 28% try to work things out
- 26% eat something
- 23% lose their temper
- 22% talk to a parent**
- 11% cry

### **About 25% of the kids surveyed said that when they are upset, they take it out on themselves, either by banging their heads against something, hitting or biting themselves, or doing something else to hurt themselves.**

These kids also were more likely to have other unhealthy coping strategies, such as eating, losing their tempers, and keeping problems to themselves.

The idea that kids would do things to try to harm themselves may be shocking to parents. But **for some kids, feelings of stress, frustration, helplessness, hurt, or anger can be overwhelming. And without a way to express or release the feelings, a kid may feel like a volcano ready to erupt — or at least let off steam.**

Sometimes, kids blame themselves when things go wrong. They might feel ashamed, embarrassed, or angry at themselves for the role they played in the situation. Hurting themselves may be a way to express the stress and blame themselves at the same time.

The poll also revealed important news for parents. Though talking to parents ranked eighth on the list of most popular coping methods, **75% of the kids surveyed said they want and need their parents' help in times of trouble. When they're stressed, they'd like their parents to talk with them, help them solve the problem, try to cheer them up, or just spend time together.**

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## What Parents Can Do To Help Children Manage Stress

You may not be able to prevent your kids from feeling frustrated, sad, or angry, but you can provide the tools they need to cope with these emotions.

**Notice out loud.** Tell kids when you notice something they might be feeling ("It seems like you might still feel mad about what happened at the playground"). This shouldn't sound like an accusation (as in: "OK, what happened now? Are you still mad about that?") or make a child feel put on the spot. It's just a casual observation that you're interested in hearing more about your child's concern.

**Listen to your kids.** Ask them to tell you what's wrong. Listen attentively and calmly — with interest, patience, openness, and caring. Avoid any urge to judge, blame, lecture, or tell your kids what they should have done instead. The idea is to let a child's concerns (and feelings) be heard. Encourage your child to tell the whole story by asking questions. Take your time, and let a child take his or her time, too.

**Comment briefly on the feelings you think your child was experiencing as you listen.** For example, you might say something like: "That must have been upsetting" or "No wonder you felt mad when they wouldn't let you in the game." Doing so shows that you understand what your child felt, why he or she felt that way, and that you care. Feeling understood and listened to helps kids feel connected to you, and that is especially important in times of stress.

**Put a label on it.** Many kids do not yet have words for their feelings. If your child seems angry or frustrated, use those feeling words to help your child learn to identify the emotions by name. That will help put feelings into words so they can be expressed and communicated more easily, which helps kids develop emotional awareness — the ability to recognize their own emotional states. Kids who can recognize and identify emotions are less likely to reach the behavioral boiling point where strong emotions get demonstrated through behaviors rather than communicated with words.

**Help kids think of things to do.** Suggest activities kids can do to feel better now and to solve the problem at hand. Encourage them to think of a couple of ideas. You can get the brainstorm started if necessary, but don't do all the work. A child's active participation will build confidence. Support good ideas and add to them as needed. Ask, "How do you think this will work?" Sometimes talking and listening and feeling understood is all that's needed to help kids' frustrations melt away. Other times change the subject and move on to something more positive and relaxing. Don't give the problem more attention than it deserves.

**Just be there.** Sometimes kids don't feel like talking about what's bothering them. Try to respect that, give them space, and still make it clear that you'll be there when they do feel like talking. Even when kids don't feel like talking, they usually don't want parents to leave them alone. You can help them feel better just by being there — to keep your child company and spend time together. So if you notice your child seems to be down in the dumps, stressed, or having a bad day — but doesn't feel like talking — initiate something you can do together. Take a walk, watch a movie, shoot some hoops, or bake some cookies. Isn't it nice to know that your presence really counts?

**Be patient.** It hurts to see your kids unhappy or worried. But try to resist the urge to fix every problem. Instead, focus on helping them grow into good problem-solvers — kids who know how to roll with life's ups and downs, put feelings into words, calm down when needed, and bounce back to try again. Remember that you can't fix everything, and that you won't be there to solve each problem as your child goes through life. But by learning healthy coping strategies, kids can manage stresses in the future.

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## Reducing Stress

How can you help kids cope with stress? **Proper rest and good nutrition** can boost coping skills, as can good parenting. **Make time for your kids each day.** Whether they need to talk or just be in the same room with you, make yourself available.

**Even as kids get older, quality time is important.** It's really hard for some people to come home after work, get down on the floor, and play with their kids or just talk to them about their day — especially if they've had a stressful day themselves. But expressing interest in your kids' days shows that they're important to you.

**Help your child cope with stress by talking about what may be causing it.** Together, you can come up with a few solutions like cutting back on after-school activities, spending more time talking with parents or teachers, developing an exercise regimen, or keeping a journal.

**You can also help by anticipating potentially stressful situations and preparing kids for them.** For example, let a child know ahead of time (but not too far ahead of time) that a doctor's appointment is coming up and talk about what will happen there. Keep in mind, though, that younger kids probably won't need too much advance preparation. Too much information can cause more stress - reassurance is the key.

Remember that some level of stress is normal; let kids know that it's OK to feel angry, scared, lonely, or anxious and that other people share those feelings.

### When to seek professional help:



Here are some of the things to look for:

- **Marked change** in school performance, sleeping, and/or eating habits.
- **Inability to cope** with problems and daily activities.
- Many **physical complaints**.
- Sexual **acting out**.
- Depression shown by sustained, prolonged **negative mood** and attitude, often accompanied by **poor appetite, difficulty sleeping, or thoughts of death**.
- Abuse of **alcohol and/or drugs**.
- Intense **fear of becoming obese** with no relationship to actual body weight, purging food or restricting eating.
- Persistent **nightmares**.
- Threats of **self-harm** or harm to others.
- Self-injury or **self-destructive** behavior.
- **Frequent outbursts** of anger or aggression.
- Threats to **run away**.
- Aggressive or nonaggressive consistent **violation of rights of others, opposition to authority, truancy, thefts, or vandalism**.
- **Strange thoughts** and feelings, and unusual behaviors.

*This list provided courtesy of the American Psychiatric Foundation*

*Contact your School Counselor/School Social Worker if your child is exhibiting the above behaviors.*

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