

## HELPING OUR KIDS DE-STRESS

Childhood—a time of exploration, learning and laughter. Although we'd like to think these are the characteristics that define American childhood, unfortunately there's another that's becoming more and more prominent—stress. It may be a product of over-scheduled lives, academic pressures, weight problems or other issues, but the impact of stress is serious on our children, tweens and teens.

According to a wide-reaching study by the American Psychological Association (APA), nearly a third of all children surveyed indicated they have experienced physical symptoms associated with stress in the month prior to the study, like trouble falling asleep, stomach aches and headaches. Even more staggering, the suicide rate today is four times higher than in the 1950s. And prescriptions for youth emotional issues have jumped up by 30 percent for boys and a whopping 68 percent for girls compared to ten years ago. It's stressful just to read these statistics but strategies do exist to assist parents and caregivers to help children cope with pressure and stress.

### EXERCISE

A study published in the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism reported that physically active kids showed minimal or no increase in cortisol—the body's hormonal reaction to stress. Exercise has also been shown to stimulate brain growth and neuron development, and may improve performance in school. If your child isn't naturally drawn to group or individual sports, consider brisk walking, yoga, dancing, playing catch, bike riding or playing at a park, and do these things together on a regular basis.

### POSITIVE MODELING

While some level of stress is an inevitable part of adult life, making sure you manage it positively is extremely helpful for children. This means fostering a positive, loving relationship with your spouse or partner, communicating respectfully with others in the household and modeling healthy ways of managing the pressures of everyday life. Remember: It's not what we say that makes a deep impression on kids, it's what we do.

### COMMUNICATION

If you believe your child is experiencing stress, it's crucial to have ongoing communication about how he or she is feeling. When you're talking with your child or teen, don't always feel the need to solve the issue immediately or ask why they feel the way they do. Often it can be very helpful for the child to just know you are there for them and hear you say, "what happened next?" or "that must be really hard."

### TIME TO PLAY

In 2006 KidsHealth.org polled 882 American kids and found 41 percent felt stress over their busy schedules. (Adults, does this sound familiar?) While extracurricular activities can help kids build skills, grow confidence and learn social skills, it turns out unscheduled play can be just as beneficial. Imaginative and free play helps children to develop executive function, a cognitive skill that involves controlling impulses, emotions and behavior. The key here is to strike a balance!

If your child is showing signs of serious anxiety or depression, contact their doctor or a mental health professional for guidance and assistance.

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