



TOOLS FOR PARENTS

As a parent, how can you make things better? Carrie Spindel, PhD, clinical assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine, has these suggestions:

KEEP CONNECTED.

Make sure you have time every day when you put your phones and your devices away, and you talk to your kids and they talk to you.

TAKE IT EASY.

See that your kids get regular unstructured time at home when they can engage in free play, rest, read, or do whatever they feel like doing. All kids need breaks.

NAME STRESS AND NORMALIZE IT.

With little kids, Spindel calls it the “worry bully” or “Mr. Worry.” Stress can make a child feel like her body is out of control. Explain to her that this is the body’s response when we expect something scary to happen. And when she learns to recognize those signs, she can do things like deep breathing to slow down the body’s stress reaction.

ASK YOUR PEDIATRICIAN FOR GUIDANCE.

You might get a referral for counseling if your child’s stress seems persistent and overwhelming. The American Academy of Pediatrics tells its members to be open to talking with parents about issues related to stress, and to ask age-appropriate questions, from the time children are very young.

TAKE CARE OF YOU.

You need to get yourself in check emotionally before you can take care of your kids. When you decrease your own stress, you increase your connection to your children.

anxiety” within the past 12 months, according to the American College Health Association.

And when WebMD asked American Academy of Pediatrics president Sandra Hassink, MD, to name the single most important health issue facing children today, she didn’t hesitate: “Stress. I think childhood today is a much more stressful event than it has been in the past. As a parent, I felt it. As a pediatrician, I feel it.”

What drives all this stress? Research and kids’ health experts cite a number of factors.

Accelerated academic expectations

Kindergarten, many parents and teachers say, is the new first grade. Thirty years ago, kindergarten was for finger painting and blocks; today’s kindergartners bring home regular homework. A report from the University of Virginia found that time spent on early literacy in kindergarten increased by 25% since 1998, while time spent on art, music, and physical education dropped dramatically.

High-stakes testing

“Our obsession with testing kids puts an enormous amount of pressure on children,” says Marian Earls, MD, a developmental and behavioral pediatrician in Greensboro, N.C., and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. “I’ve seen third-graders coming in for help because their parents are noticing sleep problems, tearfulness, and reluctance to go to school because of all the hype on performance and testing.”

Overscheduling

Enrichment activities like sports, art, or music should help relieve stress, not add to it. “You have to understand your child and watch for their cues,” Hassink says. If your child starts a new sport or music lessons and becomes overwhelmed and stressed, it may be too much. “If you

guess wrong and those three activities you thought were going to be great are just overwhelming your child, you can pull back. And it’s OK.”

Fewer healthy outlets for stress

Remember recess? Your kids might not. The National Association for the Education of Young Children reports that 7% of first-graders and 8% of third-graders never have recess. Since 2008, 20% of school systems have shortened recess time, by an average of 50 minutes per week. Physical education has also been slashed—the majority of kids have P.E. twice a week or less. At the same time, the use of electronic devices—which cut down on personal connection and physical activity—is skyrocketing.

Media saturation and exposure to adult content

Thanks to the 24-hour media cycle and constant connectivity, kids are exposed at much younger ages to terrifying news stories like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings and ISIS terrorism. And today’s young people see more than their share of violence and sexuality packaged as entertainment, often without their parents present, thanks to smartphones and tablets. Others are exposed to real violence, such as domestic abuse or gang violence at school.

Parents need to filter this information flow, Hassink says. “Look at the content your child’s watching. Put it in context for them. Parents need to be present, and be more aware of what their children are taking in.”

Bullying and teasing

In the 1980s, if you weren’t invited to a birthday party, you heard about it, but you didn’t see pictures of the fun you missed all over Instagram and Facebook. Yesterday’s nasty notes passed from hand to hand in class are today’s bullying texts, which have the capability of going viral.

All this has a long shelf life. “Kids use apps like Yik Yak and Snapchat to put

up comments and images they think are going to go away, but of course nothing ever really goes away once it’s on the Internet,” Busse says.

Too little sleep

School pressures and the lure of social media whittle away at an all-important stress remedy: sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, about one-third of parents report that homework and after-school activities get in the way of their child’s sleep. And nearly three in four children ages 6 to 17 have at least one electronic device in the bedroom, which can cut a night’s sleep by almost an hour. Research shows that even slight sleep deprivation affects memory, judgment, and mood.

Health conditions

Chronic illnesses in children more than doubled between 1994 and 2006, from 12.8% to 26.6%, with asthma, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and behavioral and learning problems topping the list. About 6.4 million children in the U.S. have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD—that’s about 2 million more than just a decade ago. Missing school and play activities for doctor’s appointments, dealing with side effects from medications, and being unable to do some of the things other children do can all be stressful.

Family disruption

“Family issues like parental illness, deployment, or divorce can really stress out kids,” Earls says. The divorce rate has remained fairly stable over the past decade or so, with about 1.5 million children each year living through their parents’ divorces. But few children of the 1980s and 1990s endured the anxiety of prolonged and frequent parental deployments. Today, more than 2 million American children have had a parent deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, and studies show that children from military families of all ages have significantly more stress and anxiety than other children.

Parental stress

The family is a child’s stress buffer. When a family struggles and can’t play that role, a child feels it. “Just like we’re asking parents to pay attention to the kids, parents also need to pay attention to themselves,” Hassink says. “We all know as parents you get in a zone where it’s just, ‘I need to do the next 20 things.’ By simply spending some unstructured time with your children, you can decrease stress and find energy for the next task.”

Like many parents, Busse and her husband realized that the stress their daughter was under required a little more help than they could give. Using the employee assistance program offered by his company, they found Valeree a counselor whom she saw for several months. “She helped her sort out what’s important and what isn’t important,” Busse says. “She also got her started journaling, and I think being able to write things down has helped her a lot. She gave her the tools she needed to be able to cope with the pressures she faces, and she’s gotten better about telling us what she needs.”



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