



Parenting, stress and how to cope

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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We have all experienced moments (both long and short) of intense stress – stress is a realistic and normal part of everyday life. In fact we need some level of stress or discomfort in order to get things done. We know from research (and anecdotal evidence) that stress is cumulative – that is, it builds up – especially if it is not dealt with. The small daily hassles we all negotiate – being late to an appointment, being stuck in traffic, dealing with spilt milk at the breakfast table contribute to this accumulation. The more significant stressful life events, however, quickly lead to feelings of anger, hopelessness, helplessness, fatigue – the list goes on. The more stressed we are, the more difficult it is for us to be flexible, resilient and rational – and there is scientific evidence to demonstrate this. Put simply, the more stressed and anxious we are, the more our brains go into automatic “survival” mode – thinking logically and rationally will not help you run away from a tiger

who is about to eat you, but the automatic and reactive fight or flight response will. So essentially, stress elicits behaviour which is more automatic and reactionary while also being less thought-out and intentional.

So what does this have to do with being a parent? When we are feeling overwhelmed, our stress will spill out in our behaviour and interactions with our kids – we will be more agitated, more likely to “snap”, and less likely to engage in positive interactions. When our kids do things which really annoy us, we are much more likely to release some of that stress right onto them, even though they were only one small part of all the daily hassles and setbacks that we have experienced – the straw that broke the camel’s back. These periods of high stress can be dangerous times for us as parents. The consequences we give our children may slowly become more reactive, punitive, or even

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physical and aggressive, as opposed to intentional and educational. When our kids are pushing our buttons, it is easy to get into the trap of pushing theirs back – we get caught in an unwinnable struggle for power. As parents, we also need to be mindful that observation and modelling are two powerful mechanisms of social learning. Our children are constantly learning from those around them how to interact, behave and operate in the world, and there is no more powerful teacher than the child’s parent or carer. Aside from the innate genetic and temperamental differences between children, it is largely the environment which shapes and forms each of them into the individuals they will later become – including the ways in which they manage their emotions and stress. The better we can cope with and manage our own stress, the better we will be modelling to our children the strategies they can use to cope with their own difficulties. We can also use these times to

educate our children about what stress feels like (muscular tension, increased heart rate, irritability, feeling overwhelmed etc.), so that they can learn to recognise when they are stressed, as well as assisting them to develop their emotional vocabulary. It is appropriate to be teaching (modelling to) our children that some level of stress is normal, and that stress is ok – as we discussed earlier, a little bit of stress is actually a good thing. Protecting our children is a powerful instinct, but taking away all forms of stress will not teach them the resilience they'll need as adolescents and adults.

There is no doubt that it takes a lot of energy to be a parent. Add to this all of the other pressures we cope with and it is no wonder that at times we may be feeling overloaded, like we have no more energy or that we are about to explode. We all need release valves – things which take away the pressure and relieve the stress and tension of everyday life. It is true to say that relaxation and de-stressing are an active part of being a good, healthy parent. For different

people this means different things, but there are a number of simple everyday things we can all do to help reduce our levels of stress:

- Be mindful of the internal physical and emotional signals that tell you you're stressed (difficulty coping with frustration and setbacks, difficulty winding down or relaxing, overreacting to things, etc) and express them to someone. Use these signals as prompts to do something to relax;
- Stress often increases when we feel we have little or no control – try to focus on the things that you do have control over, such as how you choose to cope with the stress or by minimising other stressors in your environment;
- Make sure that you are getting an adequate amount of sleep through the night – this is very important;

- Have a hobby or interest that you commit to engaging in every day;
- Make sure your diet is rich in healthy foods and drink lots of water;
- Connect with someone – call on support from your partner, family, friends or seek some professional assistance;
- If you feel like you are really stressed on the way home to your kids, try to incorporate strategies to release some of it before you walk through the front door like slow deep breathing, listening to some quiet music, or taking a quick walk around the park.

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Kids Pick Up On Everything: How Parental Stress Is Toxic To Kids*, David Code
- Go to www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au and search for *Parenting – coping with stress*



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