



## Help for Stressed out Families

### Research Brief

Kara Powell

Fuller Youth Institute

When was the last day you experienced no stress?

*Can you even remember one?*

What about your kids? When is the last day they experienced a stress-free day?

The answer might surprise you. Your kids are probably more stressed than you might think, and here's an even bigger wake-up call: Part of that stress stems from your own stress.

After surveying over 2,000 U.S. adults and over 1,000 U.S. children ranging from 8 to 17 years old, the recently-released [2010 Stress in America Report](#) holds both bad news and good news for families. First, the bad news: Our parental stress seeps into our kids. But here's the good news: By making a few small changes in your family, your home can become a refuge from stress.

### How is Parental Stress Affecting Kids?

According to the *Stress in America* study conducted by the American Psychological Association, no parent is an island. Our own stress trickles, or in some cases, gushes, through our family. Some of the most interesting (and may I say personally convicting) findings include:<sup>1</sup>

- One-third of children surveyed between ages 8-17 believe their parent has been “always” or “often” worried or stressed out about things during the past month.
- Four in 10 children report feeling sad when their parent is stressed or worried.
- One-third of children (34 percent) say they know their parent is worried or stressed out when they yell. Other signs of parental stress perceived by children are arguing with other people in the house, complaining or telling children about their problems and being too busy or not having enough time to spend with them.
- Nearly a third of children surveyed between ages 8-17 reported that in the past month, they experienced physical health symptoms that are often associated with stress such as sleep problems, headaches, and an upset stomach.

As disconcerting as those findings are, something else bothers me more. The study also found that parents are largely unaware of their kids' stress levels. According to the report, “One in five children worry a lot or a great deal about things in their lives but very few parents (8 percent) report that their child is experiencing a great deal of stress (8, 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10).”<sup>2</sup>

All this stress often adds up to burnout. According to other research, burned-out parents lead to burned-out kids. Specifically, parents who feel burned out at work are more likely to have teenage kids who experience burnout at school.<sup>3</sup>

## How Do Kids Respond to Their Stress?

Whether the source of kids' stress is their parents' stress or another source, kids' response to stress is somewhat Couch Potato-esque. Both tweens (described in this study as kids ages 8-12) and teens (in this study, kids ages 13-17) tend to use sedentary behaviors to make themselves feel better when they are worried.

- 36% of tweens and 66% of teens listen to music.
- 56% of tweens and 41% of teens play video games.
- 34% of tweens and 30% of teens watch TV.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there are worse ways to deal with stress, but given the rampant rates of obesity observed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (nearly one in five young people is obese), we need to offer our kids healthier stress-relieving tools.<sup>5</sup>

## How Can We Do a Better Job Helping our Kids with Their Stress?

In another good news/bad news dichotomy in this breaking research about stress, the good news is that the vast majority of tweens (86 percent) and teens (74 percent) surveyed said that they felt very or somewhat comfortable talking to their parents about the things that cause them stress. Here's the not-so-good news: *Only half have talked to their parents about things they are worried or stressed about in the past month.*<sup>6</sup> In other words, our kids are open to talking to us, but it's not happening very often.

While we may or may not have control over the factors that contribute to our stress right now, we *can* change the ways we talk about stress in our homes. The following suggestions can help your family both discuss stress and become a refuge from it.

1. *Explain what you are noticing in your kid.* If your child seems distracted or distraught, or if they are withdrawing into media more than normal, let them know that you notice the change. Try opening up a conversation with your kid by sharing something like, "I notice something seems to be on your mind. Anything you want to talk about?"
2. *Ask questions.* Sometimes a more direct approach is needed. Without badgering your kid, ask them how it's going with their friends, with their homework, and with their various activities. Consider raising the question about stress directly by asking: "If you were going to be stressed about something right now, what would it be?"
3. *Share your own experience with stress as a teenager.* Think back to middle school and high school. What caused you stress then? How did you handle that stress? If you tended to get stomach aches or headaches, and your child is experiencing the same, let them know that you can relate.
4. *Make feelings a regular part of your discussions.* In our family, not a day goes by that I don't ask one of my kids this question: "How did that make you feel?" Whether something exciting or distressing happens to my kids, I want them to learn to put words to all of their feelings, including stress and disappointment.

5. *Play the “What will happen next?” game.* Often kids’ stress stems from a fear of the unknown, or projecting the worst case scenario. To help kids realistically contemplate future consequences, try a great game that a friend of mine played with her kids as they were growing up called the “What will happen next?” game. She gave various scenarios to her kids (whether real or hypothetical), often while they were driving from one hockey practice to the next, and asked them: What will happen next? By helping your child understand the logical consequences of their choices, you both give them more of a sense of control and help them identify wise choices ahead of time.

6. *See if the stressor can be removed.* At times, we as parents can best aid our child by helping them remove the stressor. If they are too busy, help them choose one activity to eliminate. If their friends are toxic, help them identify a few other kids they might want to get to know. Brainstorm with them what they can change to gain greater peace of mind and schedule.

7. *Get more support.* For most of us, the more stressed we are, the less we connect with other people. Yet one of the worst ways to tackle stress is to try to go it alone. Personally and as a family, tap into the power of community to support you during your high-stress times. Whether it’s scheduling a regular phone call or coffee meeting with a friend to be honest about life, or doing something fun together with another family, involve others in your pursuit of lowering your family stress.

Just yesterday I said to my husband, “I think about half of good parenting is having enough energy.” I know I am my worst as a parent when I am stressed and tired. So while beyond the scope of the research, perhaps one of the best ways you and I can help our kids is to reduce our own stress.

Maybe, just maybe, peace in the home starts with us.

## Recommended Resources

[The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family: A Leadership Fable About Restoring Sanity To The Most Important Organization In Your Life](#), Patrick Lencioni      [Adrenaline and Stress](#), Archibald Hart

[Silence and Solitude](#) (Fuller Youth Institute)      [Activating and Resting](#) (Fuller Youth Institute)

1. [American Psychological Association, “2010 Stress in America Report”](#), <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/key-findings.aspx> [↵]
2. [American Psychological Association, “2010 Stress in America Report”](#) [↵]
3. [As reported by Tara Parker-Pope, “Burned out? So Are Your Kids,” NY Times January 27, 2010. Burnout in this study is defined as “feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by work and school demands, feelings of cynicism about job and school work or feeling inadequate and powerless.”](#) [↵]
4. [American Psychological Association, “2010 Stress in America Report”](#) [↵]
5. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Childhood Overweight and Obesity,”](#) <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/index.html>. [↵]
6. [American Psychological Association, “2010 Stress in America Report”](#) [↵]