

An Integrative Approach to Helping Your Child Manage Stress

What is stress?

We all experience stress. It is our reaction to something going on in our lives. The reaction can be physical or emotional. Stress can come from many things—a task to get done; changing schools, jobs, or where we live; a medical procedure; relationships. It can result from trying to do too much each day. Stress can be good or bad. The right amount of stress can energize us and add excitement to our days. Too much stress can weight us down. And long-term stress can lead to health problems.

What is stress like for kids?

Children have stress too. It can be hard to be a kid. There's a lot of pressure to do the right thing, do well in school, make friends, be good in sports. Also changes can be upsetting. We tend to think of childhood as a carefree time. It may not feel that way to a child. There are so many situations kids face. They may feel anxious before the start of the school year. They may be adjusting from grade school to middle school or from middle school to high school. Perhaps they have a big game, recital or test coming up. Some kids live in families that have been affected by significant events – for example, a parent's health problem or job loss. Everyone in the family may be stressed. Every day may feel overwhelming. The stress can result in headaches, chest pain, stomach aches and anxiety.



What can help kids cope with the stress they feel?

Learning the skills to manage stress – for example, to take a deep breath before reacting to a situation – may help your kids to feel better and to handle situations in a positive way. Mindfulness and similar practices can help kids cope.

Mindfulness is a centuries old practice that takes many forms. Sitting and meditating is the most common way to practice. **All mindful practices are about learning to be present in the moment.** Learning this skill can be a very good thing for kids who multi-task, such as teens who are texting on their phone, watching TV, checking Facebook, all while working on their homework.

It is important to keep in mind that everyone is different. Different approaches work for different people. There are many ways to reduce stress. One can introduce a number of different options, looking for one that is a good fit for a particular child.

*Photo of boy with headache courtesy: [David Castillo Dominici/FreeDigitalPhotos.net](https://www.freeDigitalPhotos.net)
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What are some helpful mindfulness approaches for stress?

Susan Kaiser Greenland, in her book *The Mindful Child* offers several mindfulness approaches. (Greenland is the Cofounder and Director of the Inner Kids Foundation, which brings mindful awareness to underserved kids and families in Los Angeles.) These techniques help kids learn to respond rather than react, to calm themselves, and to concentrate and focus. If parents and kids practice these exercises together, the whole family can benefit.

- **Awareness of Breath**

No matter your kids' age, mindful breathing can help. Whether they are getting ready to take a test or to take the field for a game, pausing for a few moments to calm and center themselves can help them perform better. These exercises even work well for young children. The exercises can help kids learn skills that will last a lifetime. Breath exercises are also perfect for kids who have a hard time calming down, for example, before bedtime or when transitioning from recess to the classroom.

[View/print the exercise \(pdf\)](#)

- **Friendly Wishes Meditation**

For those familiar with meditation and mindfulness, this exercise is similar to a “loving kindness” meditation. It may help kids learn to deal with negative emotions like frustration or anger toward others.

[View/print the exercise \(pdf\)](#)

In his book *Peace Is Every Step*, Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers a way to enjoy food, without eating mindlessly.

- **Mindful Eating**

Stress can lead to unhealthy eating. We crave junk food, or eat mindlessly while watching TV. Working to create a positive mealtime environment can help kids learn to separate emotions from food. They can also discover how delicious, fresh healthy foods taste!

[View/print the exercise \(pdf\)](#)



What are some other suggestions for helping kids cope with stress?

- **A reminder.** An object, such as keeping a stone in a pocket or wearing a ring, can remind kids to take deep breaths several times throughout the day.
- **Healing Touch.** Healing touch is a gentle therapy that promotes relaxation. During a session, a practitioner places her/his hands lightly on the body or slightly above it. Healing touch brings balance and harmony to the personal space around the body, also known as the energy field. Kids tend to have a natural curiosity about how Healing Touch works. In a Healing Touch session, kids and parents can easily learn a few simple techniques that can be used at home and at school to manage stress. For more information, see our handout [Healing Touch for Self Care](#) or the website of the Healing Touch Program™: <http://www.healingtouchprogram.com/>.



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- **Aromatherapy.** Aromatherapy can bring relaxation. Kids can keep a cotton ball with a few drops of an essential oil in a plastic bag. When kids feel stressed, they can open the bag and take a few deep breaths to smell the oil. (Essential oil is an oil that smells like the plant from which it comes. You can buy the oils in health food stores, spas, and on-line.) When choosing an essential oil for relaxation, there are a couple things to keep in mind.
 - Is the oil known to help people relax? Some oils that can be helpful for relaxation include: lavender, red mandarin, rose, peppermint, and chamomile.
 - Does your child like the smell of the oil? Some children associate certain smells with bad memories.

It is a good idea to discuss this aromatherapy approach with your child’s teacher, before sending the oil to school with your child.

- **Physical activity.** For kids who spend most of their time sitting at school and then in front of the computer or TV, getting some physical activity each day can be helpful.
- **Time outdoors.** Encourage kids to spend time outdoors. Spending it in nature is better yet. Even taking a few minutes to step outside and breathe fresh air may turn a stressful day into a peaceful day.



Where can I find more information?

TYPE OF SOURCE	RESOURCE	INTENDED AUDIENCE	AUTHOR
Book	<i>The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate</i> Free Press; Published in 2010	Parents	Susan Kaiser Greenland
Blog	Growing Up Healthy http://blogs.uwhealth.org/kids	Parents	UW Health Madison, Wisconsin
Website	http://kidshealth.org (Type “stress” in the search box.)	Sections for: • Parents • Teens • Kids • Teachers	The Nemours Center for Children’s Health Media, The Nemours Foundation

The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your child’s health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your child’s health and happiness.

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