

## [Are Our Kids Stressed Out?](#)



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Stress seems to be an unfortunate part of our modern lives, and parents are by no means immune. Whether it's worrying about the next potential job layoff, a nagging health problem or a never-ending to do list, stress appears to be our constant companion, reminding us that being a grownup is sometimes not all that it's cracked up to be.

It's one thing when we as parents experience stress, but it's another thing entirely when we see it in our children.

Are kids more stressed today? If so, why? And, most importantly, what can we do about it?

To help me answer these questions, I turned to Seanna Crosbie, a licensed masters level social worker and the Director of Program Services at the [Austin Child Guidance Center](#), and [Dr. Kris Sloan](#), an Associate Professor of Education at St. Edward's University.

### **Kids and Stress**

Seanna mentioned the American Psychological Association's [Stress in America](#) survey, which was first commissioned in 2006 and is repeated annually to get a snapshot of the role of stress in our lives. The 2010 study results demonstrate that parents downplay the impact of their own stress on their families. Here are a few of [the findings](#):

- Nearly three-quarters (69%) of parents say that their stress has only a slight or no impact on their children, yet 91% of children report they know their parent is stressed.
- One-third of children age 8–17 believe their parent has been always or often worried or stressed out about things during the past month.
- Four in 10 children say they feel sad when their parent is stressed or worried.

Parents not only underestimate the *impact* of their stress on their children, but also the *amount* of stress their children are experiencing. According to the same study, one in five children worry a lot or a great deal about things in their lives, but only 8% of parents report that their child is experiencing high levels of stress. Nearly a third of children indicated that they experienced physical health symptoms that are often associated with stress in the last month: trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, headaches and having an upset stomach.

When I asked Kris whether kids today are stressed, his answer was an unequivocal “yes”. As an expert on schools and learning, Kris linked a rush towards standardization in education to increased academic expectations on children. From bigger backpacks to more homework to standardized tests, schools are responding to pressure to meet educational benchmarks.

There is no question in Kris's mind: this high-stakes environment is taking a toll on kids. In fact, when Kris was doing research for his dissertation, he interviewed a school nurse, who showed him a graphic depicting the number of visits to her office over the course of the year. The graph showed a clear spike in visits during the spring, when standardized tests were administered.

Parents also contribute to kids' stress level, Kris mentioned, by embracing the shift to more academics in preschool and overstretching themselves financially to send their children to the "best" schools and highly-esteemed afterschool activities. An [article by Eric Jensen](#) that Kris recommends to his students highlights the negative impact of stress on school attendance, memory, social skills and cognition. Basically, he asserts that when your body is stressed, your brain can't fully engage and as a result, learning is compromised.

Seanna added that not all stress is bad. In fact, she said, "Stress and anxiety are a normal part of life, and often used to positively motivate people and provide opportunities for change." She was quick to add that extended periods of stress puts children at higher risk for having problems with weight, high blood pressure and heart related issues.

### **How parents can help children manage stress**

Before you get too stressed out about your children's stress, there are some things you can do to help prevent and manage stress in your household:

#### Create a low-stress environment for you and your family

Kris suggested being mindful of situations and environments which produce anxiety in children, and doing your best to manage your kid's exposure. In order to create a stress-free environment, he recommended making sure your child is well-fed, well-rested and has outlets for physical activity. Something as simple as having access to water bottles and healthy snacks in the classroom and throughout the day can help a child feel less anxious.

Seanna also promotes exercise as a great activity to do with your children which has health benefits for the whole family. Not only does active play give you the opportunity to let off steam and laugh with your child, but Seanna also notes that it releases "happy" chemicals in the body in brain which help lower stress levels.

As a parent, Kris has seen that transitions can often be stressful on kids, so he does his best to prepare his son for what's coming next. He also notices when transitions are especially difficult and tries to think of ways to make the process smoother on his child. For example, he has observed that when his son's screen time is up, he gets frustrated more easily when switching to a task that involves concentration, so Kris tries to first encourage him to do something simple to ease him back from the screen to another activity.

#### Talk to your child

It's hard to know what your child is feeling without talking about it. Seanna suggests having a time each day to check in with your family and provide a space to talk about feelings. One way she suggested doing this is by asking your child about his "high" and "low" of the day at the dinner table (for younger children, she suggested using the terms "Sunshine" and "Cloud"). For older kids, you may have more success getting information from more reluctant parties while playing basketball or cards.

#### Spend quality time with your family

Seanna believes the single most important thing we can do as parents is to spend quality time with our children. She acknowledges that although this seems simple, it can often be more difficult as a result of our busy lifestyles. Even 15 minutes a few times a week can increase your connection to your child, says Seanna, resulting in lower stress levels for your child. Allowing your child to choose an activity or a game also provides them with an opportunity to process feelings of anxiety.

### Check yourself

Now that we know kids pick up on our stress, we can be more conscious about what we say and how we act around them. Kris admitted he is now more watchful about how he shows his anxiety around his son and takes time to reflect around his son about healthier ways to cope with stress.

“Keep things in perspective,” Seanna advises. If you can spend more time focused on the positives in life, chances are that your child will, too. In addition, focusing too much on the future can prevent you from living in the present. Use your own actions and thoughts to help your child be present, Seanna suggests.

### Start a dialogue with your child’s teacher

If you learn that school is a primary source of stress for your child, consider approaching his or her teacher, recommends Kris. Although teachers can be stressed, too, Kris feels they should serve as a buffer between children and an increasingly high-stress educational climate. He suggests approaching the teacher by acknowledging the realities of the challenges he or she faces, but working together to find a remedy that will help both your child and the teacher. He also mentioned parents are choosing schools, such as the Austin Discovery School, which are adjusting expectations around homework to provide kids with a more relaxed after-school environment.

### **Resources**

Seanna recommended the following books to help open up a conversation with your kids about stress and managing anxiety:

- [\*When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety\*](#) by Kari Dunn Buron
- [\*What to Do When Your Temper Flares: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Problems With Anger\*](#) by Dawn Huebner
- [\*Nobody’s Perfect: A Story for Children about Perfectionism\*](#) by Ellen Flanagan Burns
- [\*Creative Coping Skills for Children: Emotional Support through Arts and Crafts\*](#) by Bonnie Thomas
- [\*The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry\*](#) by Lisa M. Schab

Do you see your kids stressed out? How do you try to manage stress around your family?

Written by: Nicole Basham

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## [Advice Needed: Bedtime Routines](#)

There are certain things that we do perfectly as parents. When we ace certain things, like potty training successfully, we want to share our success story with our friends and fellow moms. We want to shout it out to the world that whatever technique used was the right one, and that we do actually have some clue how to do this thing called parenting. But there are also those things that we don't do so well. The things that make our ears perk up when the topic comes up at the playground to see if there are better ways—tips and tricks—to help us do “it” a little better. For me, at this moment in parenting (because, let's admit it, these issues change constantly as our kids grow) it's the bedtime routine. We are a little off-track.

My teenage son has it down now. Phew. My four year old daughter, not so much. And with a baby on the way, I am starting to stress about her being so needy when it's time to go to sleep. While there are no bedtime tantrums, she does require one of us to lie down with her most nights until she falls asleep. She wants to have several stories read to her, a little movie before bedtime, a drink of water, another stop to the bathroom.... it goes on and on. Before we know it, two hours have passed, and we are still working at getting her to go to sleep.

Ideally, I would love to have her trained (ok, I know that's a harsh word, but it is what it is) to go to bed on her own by the time our third child makes it into this world. It would be nice to read one or two stories to her, turn out the lights and say goodnight without her getting out of bed to find us a million times. Do you have any tricks that you can share that helped you establish a better bedtime routine with your kids?over

While pondering this very topic over a week ago, I received an email from a local mama, [Lauren Sheppard](#), who has written two lovely, calming bedtime books, [Wonder and Delight](#) and [You are the World](#), that are available to read in their entirety online. Pop on over, give them a read and try them out if you are having the same struggles.

It's nice to know that this is a common struggle that many of us have. For those of you who have aced the bedtime routine, your advice is greatly appreciated here!

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