

SECRETS OF PARENTING

Parental Stress Can Spill Over to the Kids

Imagine this: You get a speeding ticket on the way to work because you were thinking about the late charge on your electricity bill. You work hard most of the day on a huge report. But at 4:15, your computer crashes. You had saved only the changes made at the beginning of the work session. The clock is ticking, and you must pick up your son at school. Your co-worker stops by to chat, and you get angry and feel even more rushed. As you bend over to turn the computer off, your elbow catches on an open drawer. Although there is no blood, a welt begins to swell, and you wonder if you can take any more problems in one day. The phone rings. It is the school; your son has broken his arm on the playground.

*The **secret of parenting** is to prevent your stress from spilling over and affecting your relationship with your child.*

Adult stress can spill over and affect children. Life just keeps getting more and more rushed, money is tight, and you need to run to keep up with family, health needs, insurance plans, appointments, grocery shopping, being a good neighbor, getting the car inspected, taking the pets to the vet, remembering mother's birthday, and more. This is stress! But you must STOP and PAY ATTENTION to anything that causes you to lash out at your children. Is it really the children's actions, or did the children simply get in the way of a stressful adult day?

This is how stress works:

- Small things that bother you pile up, or an unexpected event occurs.
- You react and must think about how to deal with the stressor, which may involve the need for money, time, family support, or other resources.
- You react to the stress and take action.
- The event either turns into a crisis, or you make a plan to deal with it using your coping skills and resources.

It's up to you to recognize stress and confront the challenges it presents without taking out your frustrations on your children. By doing this, you can reduce the impact of the stressful event on your family. These guidelines can help you confront stress.

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What to Do

Recognize the effects of stress in your children.

Although some stress is normal and even healthy, children today seem to encounter many stressful life events at earlier ages. Stress shows itself in children through complaints about stomachaches, being nervous, trouble sleeping, flare-ups of anger, and infections.

Model and teach coping skills to your children.

Children learn to cope by watching you cope. Learn a coping skill yourself, and be sure you model it for your children. Some positive ways to cope include exercise; calming techniques, such as sitting quietly while you take deep breaths; writing about your frustrations in a journal; and listening to music. Seek help from friends and family when you are in stressful situations, and teach your children to think through alternative ways to solve problems.

Take a break, and return refreshed. When you have had a stressful day, tell your children about your day and explain why you need a 10-minute break. Be sure they are supervised while you take time for yourself. Then take a 10-minute nap or sit quietly to let your heart rate slow down and your thoughts become calm. Then you will be able to calmly address issues with your children. The problem will still be there, but the spillover might not affect your interactions with your child.

Apologize. Apologize if you express anger at the children when your stress comes from something else. This provides a good example for them so they can learn to apologize, too.

Help children make sense of the world. Children and teenagers need to feel rooted in a world that makes sense to them. It makes sense to follow rules if you understand their purpose. Be an anchor in your children's lives. They need someone they can count on. Explain why stressful things happen in simple terms.

Find help. Look at your support system. Do you have friends you can count on or family members who will help? Are there special services within the community that provide help to families under stress? Reach out to friends and family, and ask for help.

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service provides a free publication that provides more information about stress and parenting:

Helping Children Cope with Stress (FCS-457)

It is available from your county Extension Center, or it can be viewed online by visiting this Web site: www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/humandev/pubs/copestress.html

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