

The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook for Kids

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This activity will probably not transform your family overnight, but it is a start. Here are some other resources you might consider to help create a more peaceful home:

1. Practice active and respectful listening. See *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (1999, Collins Living).
2. Play cooperative games with your family. See Dale LeFevre's *New Games for the Whole Family* (1988, Perigee Trade).
3. Teach your children the importance of empathy and concern for others. See *Learning to Listen, Learning to Care* by Lawrence E. Shapiro (2008, Instant Help Books).

If you feel that your family problems have gotten to a point where your input is not enough, seek help from a qualified family therapist or counselor.

Chapter 2

Don't Let Stress Get You Down

In Chapter 1, you learned about things you can do to reduce the stress in your child's life and in yours. In this chapter, your child will learn how to reduce her own stress and to cope in positive ways with stressful situations that can't be changed.

The activities will help your child recognize the big and little things that can cause her stress and will give her ideas about what can be done to make stress reduction a daily habit. Your child will also learn how a healthy lifestyle—eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, and not spending too much time in front of the TV or computer—helps make it easier to cope with stress.

Some children seem to be born with resiliency skills that enable them to bounce back from almost every adversity. Others seem to be overwhelmed by problems and may take a passive attitude, feeling that there is nothing they can do to improve their situations; these children are more prone to react to stress with anger, worry, sadness, or even health problems. Still others react to stress with self-defeating behaviors. They may stop doing schoolwork; they may participate in high-risk behaviors; they may get into fights with kids, and even adults.

The good news is that children can learn resiliency skills that will make it much easier for them to cope with stress. The activities in this chapter will teach them:

- The importance of talking about their feelings
- How talking to themselves (self-talk) can combat stress
- How to solve problems rather than letting them continue
- How a positive, optimistic attitude can help reduce stress

As you work with your child on these activities, you may be tempted to ask a lot of questions, particularly if your child tells you about problems you weren't aware of. Resist that temptation. As child therapists, we have worked with hundreds of children over the years, and we know categorically that children do not respond well to direct questions of this type. Instead, work alongside your child as she does the activities in this section and throughout the book. Feel free to make nonjudgmental comments like, "That must be hard for you" or "I wonder what that feels like." You can also tell your child what you see when you look at her. You might say something like, "You really look worried when you talk about that" or be even more specific and say, "You look so tense. Your hands are balled up in tight fists." As you can see, making nonjudgmental statements is very different from asking direct questions, and it is the best way to support your child's emotional development and coping skills.

Being a good role model is also important in teaching your child about stress reduction. If you don't live a healthy lifestyle—if you eat the wrong things, avoid exercise, or don't get enough sleep—you certainly can't expect your child to act differently. If you react to stress in your life by yelling or drinking alcohol or getting depressed, think of what you are teaching your child. And if you don't take time to relax and take care of yourself, how do you expect your child to do this?

So as you go through the activities in the rest of the book, think of yourself as well as your child. The serious effects of stress are the same for children and adults, and stress reduction and relaxation activities will work the same way on both your child and you.

Do you know what *stress* means? It means putting extreme or constant pressure on someone or something. When you are pressured like that, your brain triggers the release of chemicals that give you a quick boost of energy to help you deal with whatever is causing you stress.

Your brain produces these energy-boosting chemicals for some very good reasons. If you were attacked by a lion in the jungle, you would need your energy to run away—but that probably won't happen too often! If someone makes fun of you, you need energy to make a good decision about what to do. You may think that you should fight this person (and you would need energy to do that), but you can probably think of something better to do than fighting. Fighting, even if you win, will just bring more stress. If you have a test at school, you probably feel stress. In this case, the extra energy your brain produces will help you do well on your test.

But when you have lots and lots of stress, these energy-boosting chemicals don't help you anymore, and they can even start to get you sick. When kids are under lots of stress, they worry a lot. They may need to go to the bathroom more often than usual and they may have stomachaches or headaches. They may even have problems thinking clearly.

You may have heard adults talk about feeling stressed. They might complain about having to pay bills or go to a job they don't like, or they might just complain about growing older. But kids have stress, too. In fact, kids have much more stress than most adults realize. Here are some of the big things that cause kids stress:

- Parents having problems
- Fighting with a friend or a sibling
- Taking a test
- Not having enough privacy
- Moving to a new school
- A parent getting married again

- Not having enough money
- Problems with teachers
- A new baby in the family

Do you have any of these big stresses? Circle them in red. Next, write down any other big stresses you have:

Little things can cause stress, too. Here are some of the little things that cause kids stress:

- Having pimples
- Being sick
- Having homework
- Having too many chores
- Changes in their bodies as they become teenagers
- Hard schoolwork
- Wondering if someone likes them
- A brother or sister who is a pain in the neck

