

Children and Stress

**A Handbook
for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists**

Marty Loy, PhD

100+
creative activities
to help kids
manage stress



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Preface

This book provides an overview of childhood stress and a wide array of creative activities that can be used to help children gain control over their stress. Included are activities that help children adopt healthy coping strategies, learn new stress management skills, and value the benefits of relaxation. Each fun and engaging activity is a complete lesson plan, providing all the details an adult needs to conduct the activity and follow-up discussions. *Children and Stress: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists* is an essential resource for anyone who would like to help children deal with stress today, tomorrow, and throughout a lifetime.

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Introduction

Stress plays a positive and important role in life and health. When managed, stress helps us defend ourselves when threatened, overcome setbacks and obstacles, and perform to the best of our abilities to reach our full potential. However, when mismanaged, stress lowers our physical and emotional defenses, sets us back, and keeps us from overcoming the obstacles that limit our achievements.

Stress plays an influential role throughout the life span. It affects the adult who is anxious about an upcoming job interview and the child who is nervous about a first day at a new school. Stress provokes a myriad of psychological and physical reactions that influence the outcomes of life events. Those individuals who have knowledge about stress and how it works achieve the best outcomes. They can remain in control, maintain command over their perceptions, and utilize skills to help them cope with the situation. This simple formula (knowledge + control + skills) works in all types of stressful situations. Even in cases where traumatic or long-term stress takes its physical and emotional toll, those children and adults who possess knowledge, control, and skills fare better.

As you will read in Chapter 1, children confront a multitude of stressors. Some come from normal day-to-day situations such as keeping up with an over-scheduled activity calendar or dealing with an overly aggressive sibling. Others are less frequent but more taxing; examples include a family move or a divorce. Still others are difficult and unexpected, as in cases of neglect or a death in the family. Although the type and severity of the stresses differ, in all cases stress provokes consequences, either positive or negative. Therefore, Chapter 1 also describes some of the immediate and long-term consequences of childhood stress. Of particular note are the consequences of stress in childhood that can have an effect that lasts a lifetime. Such stress manifests itself in a range of adult psychological and physical problems, such as social anxieties, poor self-esteem, and depression; it influences everything from marital success to socioeconomic attainment.

Readers of this book will see the immediate importance of teaching children to manage their day-to-day stress; but more important, they will see that helping children learn how to manage stress well in childhood can have lifelong and even life-changing effects. Stress management like any other health-promoting behavior learned at a young age, remains available for a lifetime. The same set of skills used to navigate the stressors of relocating to a new home in childhood will be used when that child is deployed for military service as a young adult or faces the death of a parent in midlife.

This book was written to help those adults, including parents, teachers, and therapists, who influence children the most. It helps readers understand the stress lives of children, appreciate the potential consequences of childhood stress, and incorporate into their instructional repertoire a large number of skill-building activities that can be adapted for use in a variety of settings. Therefore, Chapter 2 discusses the important roles that influential adults play in supporting young children who are experiencing stress. It explains how adults can set good examples as stress role models and teach children to understand, manage, and cope with stress.

Chapter 3 explains how parents, teachers, and counselors can lead the activities presented in Chapter 4. It describes the various components that make up each activity. Understanding the components allows leaders to adjust activities to fit the specific needs of individual children and groups. Using the same components, leaders can design their own high-quality, targeted activities. This chapter also provides suggestions on how to lead discussions and ask questions that encourage both critical thought and commitment to lasting behavioral change.

Finally, the more than 100 activities in Chapter 4 constitute a treasure-trove of ready-made activities that can be used in a variety of settings. Each activity comes with a purpose statement, objectives, timeline, activity description, step-by-step instructions on the process, and sample discussion questions. The activities help children learn:

- What stress is and how to gain a sense of control over it.
- What coping strategies work now and in the future in managing stress.
- How children, parents, and all family members can work together to create a calm and healthy home environment.
- How to change perspectives, regroup, and regain control during periods of stress.
- How to engage in relaxation activities that regain focus, calm emotions, and manage anxieties.

Hold Your Fire!

by Ashley Baker

An activity for parents to recognize and control negative emotions.

PURPOSE

This activity helps parents to recognize negative behavior when they get upset with their child. It allows participants to generate more positive ways to act when faced with a stressful situation.

OBJECTIVES

After participating in Hold Your Fire, parents will be able to:

- Recognize negative emotions and associated behavior.
- Reduce family stress by understanding and controlling emotions.

TIME 30 minutes

MATERIALS

Paper, crayons, markers.

DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS

1. Participants receive paper, crayons, and markers.
2. On the paper, have them draw a picture of themselves when they lose their temper with their child. They can add words on the side describing emotions felt, words said, and actions taken. This allows the participant to associate their feelings with their behaviors.
3. Each participant shares their picture with the group and acts out what they have drawn. This is meant to cause the participant some stress so they are aware of the feelings associated with stress.
4. Have the group discuss alternative ways to behave in given situations rather than losing one's temper.

DISCUSSION

- How do you typically feel after you lose your temper with your child?
- How did you feel when you acted out your own drawing?
- How did you feel when you watched the other participants act out their drawings?
- How will this activity help you behave differently toward your child when he or she misbehaves and you lose your temper?