Keeping your cool

Advice for parents on managing stress and anger

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
Adults whose childhood relationship with their own parents has left them angry or anxious may also find it harder to cope. These stress factors can sometimes push parents past their limit so that they take it out on their children in some way.

We’ve collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you identify the stress and anger points in your life that may get in the way of good parenting, and encourage you to find ways of coping with these. It will also help you to think more carefully about your child’s feelings.

Most parents find bringing up their children very rewarding, but also pretty demanding. This may be particularly true if there are extra problems to cope with, such as money worries, housing, unemployment, fear of violence, drug or alcohol concerns or relationship difficulties.

To make for easier reading, this booklet refers to children as he or him, and she or her in alternating sections. All the information applies equally to boys and girls.

Being a parent is about watching your baby’s first smile, helping her take those first steps, enjoying all those childish games again, and deciding to drop everything and have a picnic in the park. But it’s also about your toddler having a tantrum in the supermarket, wondering when on earth you’re going to get a minute to yourself, and teenagers who think you were born in the Dark Ages.

Children of all ages require an enormous amount of their parents’ energy and patience – sometimes more than you feel able to give. You have your own needs to take care of as well. At times it can be hard to balance the two. Perhaps you’re all ready to go shopping when you realise you need to change your baby’s nappy yet again, and your 10-year-old won’t stop talking about the school trip that you know you can’t afford. Then, of course, you start feeling guilty about not being the perfect parent. By the end of the day, your head aches and you’ve had a blazing row with your partner.

Some adults may take their frustration out on their children, or even blame them for the problems in their own lives. Stress can also lead parents to discipline or punish their children in ways that can be harmful.

It’s reassuring to know that all parents find it difficult at times. There isn’t only one correct way of parenting. Children from all kinds of social, religious and cultural backgrounds can grow up to be happy, well-adjusted adults – so long as their basic needs for love, security and respect are met.

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It’s important to think about this because it influences the sort of relationship you have with your children now, and affects the way they will develop as adults.

Your own childhood
Most of us learn about being a parent from the example set by our own parents. For many of us this can be helpful, but if we had bad experiences, they can get in the way of our relationship with our children or even cause harm.
Some parents may treat their children in a particular way, not because they think it is important, but simply because that was how they were treated when they were young.
“I found myself saying things like ‘If you don’t eat your vegetables I’ll send you to your room’. I didn’t even care whether he ate his vegetables! I was just repeating what my mother said to me.”
Others vow to be nothing like their parents and to bring their children up very differently.
“My father was always comparing me to my older brother, who was so much better at everything. I vowed that if I had children of my own I would never do that.”
Most parents who were treated badly when they were children grow up to be caring and loving parents, but there is no doubt that it can make being a parent that much more difficult.

Superwoman and New Man
Many parents are stressed by the feeling that they must take responsibility for everything in their children’s lives – and that they have to do it all really well. They often find it hard to accept that some tasks can be done perfectly well by others, and that some things could be left undone. The media doesn’t help, with its image of glamorous women who manage to combine a high-powered career with bringing up beautiful children and cooking wonderful meals – all without the slightest hint of stress, of course.
Nowadays, many more dads take an active role in caring for their children. Even so, New Man is probably a media creation too, with his involvement in the home and childcare, and his ability to understand his partner perfectly.
As well as giving us unrealistic expectations of ourselves, these images may make us expect impossibly high standards of behaviour from our partners and children. This inevitably leads to conflicts and more stress.
What is stress?
If an event or situation makes us very worried or anxious, or gets in the way of our everyday life, we are said to be suffering from stress.

What causes it?
Stress depends on a number of factors:

The type of person you are
Some people seem naturally easy-going and self-assured. Others may feel tense and anxious most of the time, or may lack confidence.

What’s happening to you
There are some events that almost everyone would find difficult – happy events, such as a new baby in the family or getting married, as well as sad ones, such as the breakdown of a relationship or unemployment. But generally, what causes stress will vary from person to person. For some people, the most difficult things in life are those everyday “disasters”, such as the tights that ladder the moment you put them on.

How does stress affect us?
Stress affects people in different ways. It can make us feel tired, miserable, bad-tempered, angry or tearful. At worst, it can lead to panic attacks, insomnia and severe depression. Stress can also cause or contribute to physical problems, including headaches and migraine, asthma and eczema. Some experts think that by damaging our immune system, stress may play a part in other illnesses, including heart disease and certain cancers.

Stress also affects the way parents relate to their children, so it is important for you to understand why it happens and how your actions make your child feel. Only then can you take steps to cut down the stress in your life, and reduce the harm that your child may suffer.

Your child
Some children have a naturally easy temperament, while others are more challenging and this can be harder on parents.

Your responsibilities
We need a certain level of responsibility to give us a sense of purpose. But feeling that you have to cope with too much can cause stress.

The people around you
Whatever happens, it is always easier to cope if you have a supportive partner, family and friends.

Your ability to influence your life
Whether or not you take steps to reduce stress and make life easier depends most of all on you. You can’t change everything, but there’s nearly always something you can do and often people who are willing to help.
Signals

Although you are the only person who really knows what it feels like when you are starting to get angry, there can be lots of early warning signs.

- Can you feel your body tensing?
- Are you clenching your fists?
- Is your heart beating faster?
- Are you gritting your teeth?
- Are you feeling hotter?
- Are you pacing around?

Looking out for these signals can help you know when you have to act fast to stay in control.

Triggers

People react differently to the wide range of situations they face as parents. If you are feeling calm you might choose to sing out loud rather than listen to a toddler having a tantrum; however, if you are already feeling stressed, a toddler tantrum might be the one thing that makes you snap.

- Avoid self-pressure
  Try not to put pressure on yourself, as this can make you feel helpless, lonely and, at times, angry. Remember that being a parent is one of the hardest jobs anyone can take on. Try to find your own way of feeling good about yourself as a parent.

- Don’t compare
  All children are different, so don’t try and compare yourself with other parents based on what their children have achieved. This can put unnecessary pressure on you and your child.

- Change your routine
  If some tasks that you do every day with your children make you feel angry, change your routine. For example, if struggles between your children sharing a bath trigger off your anger, try bathing them one at a time.

Reactions

The way people react when they feel themselves getting angry can be extreme; some may seem very cold while others fly into a wild rage.

- Think positive
  Instead of getting too stressed about your child’s bad behaviour, look out for and reward their good behaviour.

- Laugh
  Humour can take the heat out of a situation and can even make everyone forget about what’s made them angry. Try to see the funny side of things if you can.

- Use distraction
  All children will try and test your limits. Setting limits and sticking to them is good for your child, but it can lead to them becoming angry, and in the case of younger children, throwing tantrums.

Use distraction to keep things calm. For example, when your toddler goes again to touch the cat food that you’ve already asked them three times not to touch, rather than getting angry, pick them up and quickly point at something interesting outside the window.

- Talk to someone
  Don’t bottle your anger up until you explode. Find someone you can talk to about how you are feeling, such as your partner, a friend, a health visitor or your GP.
  “You have to remember that you are the adult and set a good example – so however mad you feel, don’t show it or the kids will just do the same.” Ellen, mum of Susie, 7, and Matthew, 4

Find out more

Anger management classes

Your GP should be able to tell you about anger management classes in your area, or might refer you to a counsellor or self-help group.

Mental Health Foundation
Provides information, carries out research and campaigns on mental health problems.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind
Provides information, support and services across England and Wales on mental health problems.
www.mind.org.uk 0845 766 0163