WHY A GUIDE ON STRESS?

The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) realises that parents have a unique role to play in creating the citizens of tomorrow, and we want to do all we can to help. We know that almost all parents want to be the best parents they can, and want the best for their children.

Most parents find bringing up their children very rewarding, but also very demanding. This may be particularly true if there are extra problems to cope with, such as lack of money, cramped housing, long-term unemployment or relationship difficulties. 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 their children suffer in some way.

This booklet will help parents to identify the stress points in their lives which may get in the way of good parenting, and encourage them to find ways of coping with these. It will also help parents to think more carefully about their children's feelings.
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. It’s 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.

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. The ideal parents who seem to have perfectly behaved children, spotlessly clean houses, adoring partners and immaculate clothes probably don’t exist outside of advertisements, and the reality can be very different.

Real parents all have their ‘off days’, but if they feel that their lives are bad most of the time, it can be difficult for them to meet their children’s needs. 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 which can be harmful.

A completely stress-free family life is probably impossible, because loving relationships, whether with partners or children, always involve a certain amount of conflict and some give and take. But if you feel that there is too much stress in your life, there are steps you can take to improve life for yourself and your children—however bad you might be feeling at the moment.

“I love hearing my daughter say she loves me.”

“The best thing is watching your child grow up.”

“I can’t cope when they’re disobedient or rude.”

“I worry about their future.”

“If you love and care about your children, you’re bound to have arguments with them sometimes.”
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."

Some people carry the childhood frustrations they felt towards their parents into their adult lives. They may even take these feelings out on their own children - sometimes without realising it. It is important that we all understand 'the child within us', because these feelings can surface quite unexpectedly in dealing with our own children.

"Looking back, I think I hurt my child because I wanted to get my own back for what my parents had done to me."

Most parents who were abused 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.

How has your own childhood influenced the kind of parent you are? If you think you need help to cope with some of the feelings that looking at your childhood has brought to the surface, you may like to contact one of the organisations listed on page 22.

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 does not help, with its image of the glamorous woman who manages to combine a high-powered career with bringing up beautiful children and cooking wonderful meals - all without the slightest hint of stress, of course.

New Man is probably a media creation, too, with his involvement in the home and child care, 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.

Think about the images of parents and families on the television and in magazines. Do you think that you might be influenced by them?
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 which 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, unemployment or homelessness. But generally, what causes stress will vary from person to person. What one person sees as a challenge, another may see as a threat.

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, the queue in the post office that never seems to get shorter, or the car that won’t start.

Your child
Some children are naturally 'easy' and some are so difficult that they would test the patience of a saint.

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 on several factors – but most of all it depends on you. You can't change everything, but there's nearly always something you can do and often people who are willing to help.

How does stress affect us?
Stress affects people in different ways. It can make us feel tired, miserable, bad-tempered 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 parents to understand why it happens and how it makes them feel. Only then can parents take steps to cut down the stress in their lives, and thus reduce the harm that children may suffer.