



Helping your child understand and manage stress

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. While not all stress is bad – at times, it provides energy and motivation – high levels of stress can negatively impact a child’s mental health and well-being.

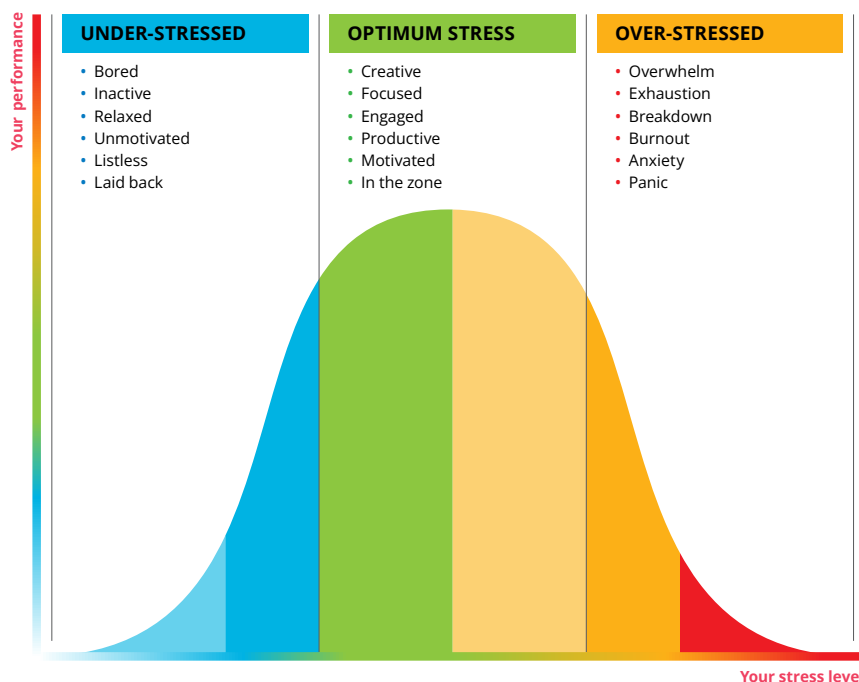
The good news is that you, as a parent/caregiver, can help your child understand stress and develop healthy ways of managing it. Note that stress affects everyone differently, depending on their unique circumstances.

This resource was developed to assist parents/caregivers in recognizing and managing stress in their child, including how to seek help if needed.

Note: While we use the term “child” throughout, we recognize that the child in your care may be a teenager or young adult, and that you may be caring for more than one child.

What is stress?

“Stress is the pressure, tension, physical discomfort, and sometimes worry that comes from many different situations.” (Ontario Ministry of Education). It’s a natural human response to “stressors” (i.e. challenges in our lives). At lower levels, stress can be a helpful motivator. However, high-level stress – or stress that continues for a prolonged period – becomes problematic.



Stress is a natural emotional response to stressors (challenges in our lives) and usually resolves when the stressor is gone or ended.

This visual demonstrates the impacts of stress when experienced at different levels. The goal is to keep stress levels within the optimum stress range, as an over-stressed state can be a contributing factor to many different mental health concerns.

Image from Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grade 7 & 8 – Lesson 8.2, Ontario Ministry of Education



What happens in your child's brain and body when they are stressed?

When a child experiences stress, the brain triggers the release of hormones, activating the stress response.

An over-stressed child may exhibit the following:

- anxiety
- negative thoughts
- withdrawal from family and friends
- sadness
- hopelessness
- physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- changes in eating or sleeping
- poor school performance

Why is it important for me to understand my child's stress?

When stress builds up, it can impact your child's emotional, behavioural, mental and physical health. If you're concerned about your child's stress levels, talk to them about what you notice. This helps them recognize how stress impacts how they think, act, and feel. Assure them you'll work through the difficulties together.

How can I help my child manage stress?

There are many ways to help your child cope with stress, including:

Daily Practices:

- Keep a predictable routine. Knowing what to expect makes children feel safe and secure and lowers stress levels.
- Work on the basics like sufficient sleep and plenty of exercise.
- Make time for connection with loved ones.
- Build time into your day for relaxation (disconnected from devices). Rest is productive, so it is ok to say no to some things to make space for rest.
- Allow time in your child's day for play and hobbies.
- Help your child to notice, name and navigate their emotions. Help them express their feelings by putting how they are feeling into words, or showing how they're feeling through art, music or dance for example.
- Help your child identify when they are feeling stressed and how stress shows up for them. For example – do they feel tense, grumpy, or have negative thoughts?

Practical strategies for stress management

The best stress management strategies for children are ones that work for them. Work with your child to brainstorm a list of things that help them cope in times of increased stress. Encourage your child to draw or write their list of coping strategies.



Below are some categories of stress management strategies that you be helpful to you and your child when brainstorming coping strategies.

Here are some categories to help expand your thinking:

MOVE	physical activities, both gentle and energetic	PLAN	ways to organize and set up your environment and day
CREATE	make something meaningful to you	CONTRIBUTE	give back to the world around you
CONNECT	spend time with who or what matters to you	THINK	engage your brain, learn something new
CHILL/RELAX	calming and relaxing activities	ROUTINES	day-to-day habits that support you

Image from Mental Health Literacy Modules for Career Studies (GLC20), Ontario Ministry of Education

Here are some additional tips:

- Encourage your child to practice stress management strategies so they're comfortable and familiar with them when they need them.
- Practice calm breathing with your child, like "[Circular Breathing](#)".
- Explore [grounding strategies](#) with your child.
- Speak with your child's teacher to find out what students are learning in the classroom about stress and coping, and about any opportunities to practice these skills at home.

"As we consider stress management strategies and routines, it's important to include help-seeking. There will be times when we all need help with the experiences of stress we navigate. For children, these can include experiences like conflict with others; identity-based experiences such as racism or homophobia; or ongoing stress related to things like a medical condition or finances. While healthy personal routines and stress management strategies are important, these kinds of stressors are not a child's responsibility to manage alone. When they appear, seeking support from a trusted adult is essential." (Ontario Ministry of Education)

Note: The Ministry of Education offers mandatory lessons about mental health literacy in grades 7, 8 and 10, these lessons include information on stress and how to access support. This information is available to you as parents/caregivers to continue the conversation at home.

Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grades 7 and 8

Exploring Mental Health Together: Resources for parents and caregivers

Learning about mental health at school can help students to build skills and habits that promote well-being, to cope and resolve with managing stress, recognizing signs of common mental health problems, and knowing when and how to seek help if needed. In addition, your child learns through the delivery of Educational Mental Health Literacy Modules for grades 7 and 8, you can learn along with them and find helpful tips on how to continue positive mental health and well-being for your child.

At School Mental Health Ontario, we provide Ontario-wide, accessible, evidence- and experience-informed resources to support student mental health. On the <https://www.ssmho.org> website, you will find information about mental health, substance use, and school mental health in Ontario.

This resource list for parents and caregivers is designed to complement the learning your child will receive through the Ministry of Education Modules.

Are there activities we can practise at home?

Finding ways to help your child manage stress or support them in developing a range of social and emotional skills (e.g., identifying their emotions, working through conflict, problem solving, and conflict resolution) is an important life skill. Practising these skills before we need them to be used helps to prepare and increase the likelihood that these skills and strategies will work when your child needs them most.

Here is a resource that might help to imagine some ideas to try at home:

Parents and Caregivers Mental Health Activities for Children

This is a series of 12 mental health activities designed for parents and caregivers to try at home with their child.

School Mental Health Ontario | Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario | Page 11 | www.ssmho-smsso.ca



Where can I go for help if I have concerns?

At school – There are many people who can provide support at school. You can speak to your child’s classroom teacher or a school staff member with whom you feel comfortable. Ontario schools offer assessment and brief prevention and early intervention services from social work and psychology staff.

In the community – If more support is needed, school staff or your family doctor can connect your child with mental health services. If you do not have a family doctor/nurse practitioner, please visit <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-family-doctor-or-nurse-practitioner> to get connected.

You can also contact:

- [Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#) – Access free mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person,) ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals necessary.
- [One Stop Talk](#) – Instantly connect with a therapist from anywhere in Ontario to create a plan and access additional support when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) – Access a range of services in several Ontario communities. Easily access free services by walk-in or appointment.

Supporting a child experiencing a mental health problem can be challenging; consider reaching out for your own support. Contact [Parent’s for Children’s Mental Health](#) to connect with other parents and caregivers going through similar experiences.

Helpful resources

- <https://www.apa.org/topics/children/stress>
- <https://cmha.ca/brochure/stress/>

References

Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grades 7 and 8, Ontario Ministry of Education

Optimal Stress Range diagram – Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grades 7 & 8 - 8.2, Ontario Ministry of Education

Mental Health Literacy Modules for Career Studies (GLC20), Ontario Ministry of Education

