

# IS YOUR CHILD STRESSED OUT?

Everyone experiences stress. Stress is how the body handles life's challenges—chemicals are released to increase certain bodily processes and decrease others so we can react quickly and effectively during dangerous or high-pressure situations. Sometimes being under stress can lead to good results for your child or teen, even if it makes them uncomfortable at the moment. For instance, cramming for a test can be stressful, but lead to a better grade. Or the stress of being down a few goals in a soccer game can cause a surge in performance to score more points. These stress reactions usually don't last long, and your child or teen's body can return to normal relatively quickly. But if stress doesn't let up, then the body doesn't get the break it needs – and mental and physical health can be affected.

While most kids and teens aren't dealing with bills, difficult bosses, and frustrating commutes, there are plenty of situations that can cause them stress. Some stress may seem just a part of growing up, but there are also children and teens who are dealing with more serious stressors.

**48%** of 11-17 year olds surveyed by MHA felt that they were **VERY** stressed out.

## WHAT IS STRESSING CHILDREN AND TEENS THE MOST?

Mental Health America surveyed 11-17 year olds who came to MHAScreening.org about what was stressing them out. Here's are the top 5 things that caused them stress.

**76%**  
**GETTING  
GOOD GRADES**

**76%**  
**PREPARING  
FOR THE  
FUTURE**

**68%**  
**LONELINESS**

**62%**  
**BODY  
APPEARANCE**

**61%**  
**JUGGLING  
PRIORITIES**  
(School, sports,  
jobs, clubs, etc.)

## SIGNS OF STRESS

Survey takers said they knew their stress levels were getting out of control when they experienced wanting to be alone, wanting to sleep all the time, and/or losing their temper quickly.

Here are some other things to look out for in your child or teen that signal they are feeling stressed-out:

- Headaches or other unexplained aches and pains
- More frequent visits to the school nurse
- Getting colds more than usual
- Feeling sad or moody
- Seeming "burned out"
- Sounding defeated when talking about challenges
- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Fighting with family and friends
- Trouble thinking clearly
- Acting nervous or anxious

If your child or teen has one or more of these symptoms, be alert. They could be signs of a physical illness coming on. If not, it's time to find out what is happening in your child or teen's life, and whether they are getting stressed out. Get tips for talking to your child or teen at [bit.ly/startmhconvo](https://bit.ly/startmhconvo).

# HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS MANAGE STRESS

You might not be able to stop what is stressing your child or teen, but you can help them. If you notice that they're showing signs of stress, try the following:

## REMIND THEM TO BE KIND TO THEMSELVES.

No one is perfect. No one gets it right all the time. No one always has all the answers. If they are trying hard and doing their best, that's what is important.

## HELP THEM MANAGE THEIR TIME.

If they feel overwhelmed with all that they need to get done, help them to set a schedule and set small goals and break down tasks into manageable chunks. If they still feel overwhelmed, it may be necessary to cut out some activities.

## DON'T FORGET THE BASICS.

Feed them healthy foods, and limit caffeine and sugar. Encourage them to go to bed by a certain time so they get enough sleep for the following day.

## LOOKOUT FOR SIGNS OF SUBSTANCE USE.

Teens especially may turn to drugs, alcohol, or vaping to cope with stress. If you find out that your child or teen has, remind them that substances won't solve anything and may lead to bigger problems, and keep a close eye on their behavior.

## LET THEM KNOW IT'S OK TO "LET IT OUT."

They may need to cry or have a good laugh. Laughing and crying can both help release the feeling of pent up emotions.

## HELP THEM RELAX.

Relaxing is essential for everybody's physical and mental health. Find out what really helps them relax and encourage them to spend at least half an hour each day doing it. It might be curling up with a good book, going on a bike ride, or listening to music.

## TELL THEM YOU LOVE THEM.

Children and teens may stress themselves out because they feel as though they need your approval. It's important that they know you will love them no matter what.

## REMIND THEM THAT IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP.

No one should suffer in silence and knowing when to ask for help is a strength, not a weakness. Make sure they know that you are there to talk if they need you and be open to finding additional help through school counselors or mental health professionals if problems with stress continue.

## WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you have worked with your child or teen to help them manage their stress, but they still seem to be struggling, they may be experiencing the early signs of a mental health condition.

**HALF OF ALL MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS START BY AGE 14.<sup>1</sup>**

Take the parent screen at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhascreeing.org) to see if your child or teen may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

### SOURCES

<sup>1</sup>Kessler, R. C., Chiu, W. T., Demler, O., Merikangas, K. R., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of general psychiatry*, 62(6), 617–627. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.617

# IS YOUR CHILD LONELY?

**NEARLY  
HALF**

of Americans report often feeling alone (46%) or left out (47%).<sup>1</sup>

**CHILDREN AND TEENS ARE NO EXCEPTION.**

**OVER  
2/3**

of 11-17 year olds surveyed by MHA felt stressed out about loneliness.

## EFFECTS OF LONELINESS

Research shows that chronic loneliness has the following effects:<sup>2</sup>

- Increased levels of cortisol, the stress hormone
- Less restful sleep
- Negative impact on physical health (more than smoking or obesity)
- Headaches or other unexplained aches and pains
- Poor self-care (grooming, hygiene, diet)
- Higher likelihood of alcohol or drug use
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Negative outlook on life
- Poor self esteem
- Greater risk of suicide

Furthermore, the same part of the brain that reacts to physical pain is activated by social rejection.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMON CAUSES OF LONELINESS

Certain life circumstances may cause children and teens to feel lonely, such as:

- ▶ Moving to a new neighborhood
- ▶ Changing schools
- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ An older sibling leaving home
- ▶ Being "single" when their friends have boyfriends or girlfriends
- ▶ Fights with friends
- ▶ Being bullied
- ▶ Death in the family

## SIGNS OF LONELINESS

### YOUNGER CHILDREN MAY:

- ▶ Create imaginary friends to make up for lack of real friends
- ▶ Seem clingy or start asking you to play with them more than usual
- ▶ Seek your attention by misbehaving, acting silly, or interrupting you when they know they shouldn't
- ▶ Act timid or unsure of themselves
- ▶ Cry more often than other children their age

### ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS MAY:

- ▶ Retreat to their rooms for long periods of time
- ▶ Start talking to you more than usual
- ▶ Seem sad
- ▶ Appear to not have friends to hang out with outside of school
- ▶ No longer hang out with friends that they used to spend a lot of time with
- ▶ Talk negatively about themselves

By contrast, if your child or teen seems to be spending a lot of time alone, they may not actually be lonely. There are some children and teens who enjoy reading or popping in a pair of earbuds to listen to music over trips to the mall or parties. The easiest way to figure out if your child or teen is just introverted or whether they are lonely is to ask.

## GOING ONLINE: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Most people who are parents and teachers didn't grow up using the internet the way children and teens do now. Between social media, gaming, and general internet use, there are a lot of ways that being online can impact loneliness, for better or for worse.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Fifty-seven percent of teens say they have met a new friend online and 68% of teen social media users said they received support from others during challenging or tough times.<sup>4</sup> However, not all social media use is good for teen friendships.

While less than a quarter (24%) of teens find social media to have a mostly negative effect on their lives, 27% of those say that social media has caused them to be bullied or affected by rumor spreading, which can cause loneliness.<sup>5</sup> Another study found that of teens who use social media, 53% said they saw people posting about events that they weren't invited to.<sup>6</sup>

### GAMING

If your child or teen seems to be spending a lot of time gaming, they may actually be socializing in their own way. While virtual friendships can never replace face-to-face interactions, many teens go online to communicate with existing friends outside of school and make new friends.

Both boys and girls say that they have met new friends while playing games online, with over 4x as many boys doing so than girls. Furthermore, 78% of teen gamers say that playing online makes them feel closer to friends that they already know.<sup>7</sup>

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you suspect that your child or teen is struggling with loneliness, the best way to figure out for certain is to start a conversation and ask. If loneliness is a problem, here are some things you can do to help:

**Talk to them about their interests.** Find out what they enjoy and then look into groups or classes that they may be able to join to further explore those interests.

**Try recreational sports.** Rec sports teams give your child or teen the chance to meet a group of their peers that may not necessarily go to the same school as them.

**See what your faith community has to offer.** There may be youth groups or classes during worship services that your child or teen could become part of.

**Make time for extended family.** If your child or teen has cousins or other relatives around their age that are within a reasonable distance, set up time for them to get together.

**Talk to their teachers.** See if they may be able to facilitate more small group interactions during class that might help your child or teen make friends or match them up with someone to sit with at lunch time.

**Leverage your own friends.** If your friends or coworkers have children or teens, organize a time for them to meet with you and bring their child so both adults and children can socialize. This could be just a visit to one another's homes, a meal out at a restaurant, or a trip to a local event or attraction.

**Consult with a therapist.** If you think that your child or teen is lonely because they struggle with social skills, a therapist can help.

## WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

Long-term loneliness can lead to the development of mental health conditions like anxiety or depression if not addressed early. If you suspect that your child or teen is already experiencing signs of a mental health condition, take the parent screen at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhscreeing.org).

It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with information and resources to help guide you through next steps.

#### SOURCES

<sup>1</sup><https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/teenage-isolation/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2011/03/22/1102693108.abstract>

<sup>4</sup>Teens, Technology & Friendships (Pew Research Center 2015)

<sup>5</sup>Teens, Social Media, Technology (Pew Research Center 2018)

<sup>6</sup>Teens, Technology & Friendships (Pew Research Center 2015)

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.