



# HOW NOT TO BUBBLE WRAP KIDS

## LEARNING HOW TO USE DAILY STRESS TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE

If you've paid attention to the media recently, you might now believe that any stress is bad for a child's physical and mental health, that stress has reached epidemic proportions, that you need to do everything you can to reduce the amount of stress in your life and that various products from supplements to special water to squeeze balls will decrease your child's stress and make them healthy.

BUT the science says that this isn't true. In fact, experiencing and learning how to use stress is an important part of having good mental health and there is no evidence that any of the highly marketed stress reduction products are any more helpful than going for a brisk walk!

**Mental health** is the capacity to successfully adapt to life's circumstances. It does not mean happiness nor does it mean not having negative feelings, worries, or difficulties. It includes the experience of stress and the use of that experience to help your child learn new skills and effectively address the many and frequent challenges of life, now and in the future.

**This means that someone with good mental health isn't someone who avoids or is protected from experiencing stress, but instead, someone who uses the stress they experience to learn and grow.**

## THE LANGUAGE OF STRESS

**Stressor:** An event that triggers the stress response in your body. It can be an internal event, like a thought, or an external event, like a social interaction, sound, chemical, etc.

**Stress Response:** Your body's signal that you need to adapt and change in order to accommodate or deal with the stressor. This signal includes your heart racing, palms sweating, shortness of breath, butterflies in your stomach, and more.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF STRESS

There are different types of stress and, actually, most daily stress is good for you!

**Positive:** Positive stress is short-term and it helps us learn how to adapt and grow. Situations that cause positive stress can be positive or negative (e.g., writing an examination, giving a presentation, calling someone you don't know, not making the school team, etc.) and happen daily – often multiple times a day.

**Tolerable:** Tolerable stress is also short-term but involves situations where there is more serious impact (e.g., someone dying, parent's divorce). It occurs multiple times throughout your life and as long as you have supportive relationships around, is unlikely to have any lasting negative consequences.

**Toxic:** Toxic stress is prolonged and extreme (e.g., abuse, neglect, violence), but for most young people, this is rare. Many will go their whole lives without experiencing toxic stress.

Toxic stress is the only type of stress that's actually bad for you. Experiencing positive or tolerable stress actually makes us stronger, healthier and more understanding human beings!



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**Think about your immune system.** Exposure to germs on a regular basis helps to make your immune system stronger. It teaches your body how to react so that when your body is faced with a larger challenge, such as an infection, it has the tools it needs to fight it off. Exposure to daily stressors works in much the same way. It teaches your brain how to react (or cope) so that when you are faced with a more intense stressor, you've already developed and practiced the skills you need to handle the situation successfully. You have learned to adapt. You are becoming resilient. If we deprive children and teens of the opportunity to learn how to cope with stressors by eliminating stressors or by intervening to solve their problems, we're actually making it harder for them to grow into healthy and competent adults.

Young people need to be taught that the stress response is normal and a call to action, not anxiety. They also need to learn problem solving and healthy coping skills and be given the opportunity to practice those skills without adults hovering over them. If we remove kids from a stressful situation before they've had a chance to use their coping skills, the situation is going to feel even more stressful the next time they encounter it. And they will encounter those stressors again because no one lives a stress-free life. *Persistent avoidance of stressful situations can lead to learned helplessness!*

### SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

**Change how we think about stress.** Reframe the stress response as your body preparing to tackle this challenge. Stop using the word anxiety when you mean stress response.

See Kelly McGonigal's TedTalk for more: <https://youtu.be/RcGyVTAoXEU>

**Model or teach effective coping.** This includes problem solving, using social support, making healthy choices about food, exercise, and sleep, and much more.

**Using stress reduction or relaxation exercises sparingly.** This includes deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, meditation, and more. These techniques may be useful for some people to help calm themselves but they do nothing to solve the problem causing the stress response. They should be used when a person feels so overwhelmed that they cannot effectively apply problem solving/coping strategies and they should always be linked to developing or using an effective coping strategy designed to solve the problem causing the stress response. Over-reliance on stress reduction techniques without changing the way we think about the stress response or learning how to solve the problems that this response is alerting us to may provide temporary relief but is not a substitute for engaging with life and learning how to navigate the often challenging and stormy seas of life.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, check out: <http://www.teenmentalhealth.org/understanding-stress/>