



Does Childhood Stress Stay with You for Your Whole Life?



By Jessica Ashley, Senior Editor, Parenting | Parenting – 4 hours ago

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No matter how big the toothless smiles, how many toys are packed into the playroom, how perfect the family holiday photo seems, many children experience some kind of stress while they are growing up that **one researcher says could stay with them into adulthood.**

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"If a child has a pervasive sense of adversity in his or her childhood for whatever reason, the brain responds to that kind of hardship by becoming more sensitized to stress," Dr. Rajita Sinha, director of the Yale Stress Center, recently explained to CNN.

The brain becomes hard-wired to react more strongly, she says, making that person more likely to have a greater reaction to stress than people who do not have a similar history.

What childhood stress is so big that it burrows into the brains for decades? Research points to **pain, illness, and injury** as major stressors for kids. But a child's stress level can increase to "severe" during family conflicts such as divorce, abuse, witnessing violence, financial crisis, the death of a loved one, or a parent who suffers from addiction or mental health problems.

While anxiety is a **normal reaction to stress** and can even **be OK for children to navigate**, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, some people experience excessive levels of anxiety. **One in eight children are affected by an anxiety disorder**, according to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, including those who are deemed to have post-traumatic stress disorder.

While humans are "adaptive animals," Sinha says many children are experiencing stress before their ability to deal with it is completely developed. The adversity in their young lives therefore leads to a higher overall stress level into adulthood.

Read about the symptoms of stress and anxiety

"The stress pathway is developing during childhood. The stress system needs time to grow and become fully functional," Sinha says.

Small children under stress are sources of concern, according to her studies. But she also sees adolescents, who are more likely to self-isolate, as particularly vulnerable. **Teenagers' stress symptoms** may range from sleep difficulty to overeating to school truancy to taking pain medication unnecessarily.



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While parents may not be able to completely shield children from stressors -- a kid's home life might be magical but they may encounter a bully in Sunday school or suddenly lose a grandparent to cancer -- Sinha says parents, teachers, and caregivers can help build resistance and optimism when kids experience stress.

"Things happen. Families will face adversities. But if parents, teachers, and other adults are helping to guide children by talking about the trauma and providing them with adaptive skills, then those children will be more inclined toward protection and resilience, as opposed to risk."

How can we help protect our kids from becoming over-stressed adults?

1. Seek social support. Sinha says that interacting with others and garnering family support is a primary way we can protect kids from the risks of stress.

2. Embrace education and intellectual challenges. Children are more likely to learn to navigate tough stuff if they are challenged in a safe environment like school, she reports. Teachers that encourage students to think abstractly, for example, are helping their brain develop in ways that will serve stressed children in the moment and, perhaps, in the long term.

3. Develop optimism and tactics to control emotions. Parents and other adults who are active in a child's life may be able to help protect kids from carrying stress forward in such significant ways. A University of Wisconsin-Madison study revealed that a mother's voice, whether during a conversation or phone call or whisper during a hug, can produce significant **biochemical responses that soothe stressed children**. Another study of 405 inner-city children showed that **yoga instruction boosted the kids' self-esteem and grades** and decreased behavioral problems associated with the stress of poverty in South Central Los Angeles. **Getting enough sleep consistently** has also been shown to help children deal with stress more effectively. Some even say a **little playful, safe roughhousing** can do kids (and parents) a world of good.

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Brittany 4 hours ago

264 4

Ugh, this is so true. My mother has an extremely high level of anxiety along with emotional problems. My childhood was so stressful I can't even remember most of my life. PLEASE people, if you have any kind of mental illness, take steps to get it under control before you have kids!!

[▶ 24 Replies](#)

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Patty • San Francisco, California • 4 hours ago

269 6

As a survivor of a very stressful childhood (incest, alcohol) I can tell you firsthand that this is not 'psychobabble'. It took me many years to realize that my adult patterns for dealing with stress (substances, anger) resulted from never having had a chance to develop normally.

▶ 16 Replies



Athena 4 hours ago

181 4

For all of the people making cracks about how children should just "man up" and "get over it" there are some trials that you just don't get over on your own. Especially when they happen to you at an age that you don't understand what is really going on. We're not talking about getting picked on... [More](#)

▶ 12 Replies



Surfgrl460 4 hours ago

42 0

This is my life. I had a pretty crappy unstable childhood. It screwed me up. I am stressed and anxious all day every day. :(I feel like I will never know happiness.

▶ 12 Replies



Sheila M • Kansas City, Missouri • 4 hours ago

70 1

I can agree wholeheartedly with this - I had a father who was emotionally abusive and highly controlling, and I can clearly see adult reactions and patterns that are holdovers from that.

▶ 4 Replies



Georgiagirl • Topeka, Kansas • 4 hours ago

141 4

Clearly Michael and Ann Marie haven't experience trauma during their childhoods. Congratulations. But for those of us who have, this article certainly offers me comfort. I am a successful women in her 50's who went to hell and back during childhood. Not only did I get abundant help from therapy but... [More](#)

▶ 3 Replies

Slacker5 4 hours ago

37 0

Too bad neglect is the most common form of abuse, leading to childhood behavioral issues and stress. Most of the parents won't even bother reading this article. You can't teach a kid how to cope with stress if you never teach them, period.

▶ 3 Replies

Cullen Fan 4 hours ago

57 1

This is very true and losing a parent in childhood and experiencing physical abuse by another, it will affect you your whole life, no matter how you try to sugar coat it. But it's how you let it effect you whether you decide to let it consume you in a negative way, or rise above adversity and... [More](#)

▶ 3 Replies

Wayne • Moscow, Idaho • 4 hours ago

27 0

There are two ways to view the article. First, I'm a child of a very stressfull childhood, I used that as a learning experience to make me a better person. So I don't exactly agree. Second it amazes me how divorce has become such a part of our society. I seen it a lot as a law enforcement officer,... [More](#)

▶ [6 Replies](#)

Madison 4 hours ago

78   5

Well, considering my mother was a meth-addict for the majority of the time I lived with her, who cheated on my father infront of me, with multiple men, then divorced my dad, and continued to have unhealthy relationships with alcoholics, other drug addicts, biker gangs, men half her age, etc, not to... [More](#)

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Kbqlady 4 hours ago

23   1

I grew up with my father, who had PTSD because of being a concentration camp survivor (the Soviet Gulag), a mentally ill mother, a bullying eldest sister, another older sister, who was also mentally ill, as well as my own mental problems. Can you imagine what this family would be like? I don't... [More](#)

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Elizabethh • **Perry, New York** • 4 hours ago

39   2

Some commenting here have no idea.Normal stress is one thing,Horrible abuse,verbal and physical,is another altogether.If you don't know,you shouldn't be so glib about it. I can say that without outside support (friends,their parents,teachers) I would have been lost.This was in the days before we... [More](#)

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Mary • **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania** • 3 hours ago

9   0

i agree with this article being very true. a few weeks ago, my therapist told me basically the very same thing. i am now 26, and have many emotional/physical issues. i guess my breaking point was when i turned 23, i attempted suicide atleast 6 times within 2.5 years. in and out of treatment. i'm... [More](#)

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Cds 4 hours ago

52   4

When kids (14-18yr olds) have kids they are NOT ready emotionally or financially to raise healthy, well adapted kids. Sadly we have a system that rewards idiotic behavior and society at large suffers with damaged schools, higher crime, drugs and a whole host of problems associated with unequiped... [More](#)

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Babydoll • **Little Rock, Arkansas** • 3 hours ago

33   2

School is not a safe environment . Most schools only pay attention to the children whose parents show up. They don't need the help. The child crying in the corner, who's mother never makes it to conferences --that child is ignored. I have seen it over and over again. If you are lucky another parent... [More](#)

▶ [3 Replies](#)

Corsair 4 hours ago

47   4

When adults find themselves in stressful, unpleasant environments, they have the power to make changes. They can get a divorce, move from the neighborhood, change jobs. Children have none of these powers. They cannot change families, neighborhoods, schools or teachers. This powerless in itself... [More](#)

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Niche 3 hours ago

6 0

I had an awful childhood, was molested when i was 4, n told it was my fault. was molested again when i was 9, n got physically abused for it n got raped when i was 13. guess what? it was done by three different uncle in laws. that still f***s me up, even now im as scared as hell of older men n im... [More](#)

▶ 6 Replies

Juiceman • El Paso, Texas • 4 hours ago

20 1

I had a rough childhood going thru violence and loss at an early stage in my life as a kid i have been always anxious i am 29 years old now what has help me is spirituality, being optimistic, being social, keeping busy. Stress is always going to be there dont deal with it doing drugs stay active... [More](#)

▶ 1 Reply

4 hours ago

31 3

My child's father stands our child up and rarely sees our child. I always wonder what damage that will cause my child down the road even though nothing is showing up right now.

▶ 20 Replies

HarryHausen • Dekalb, Illinois • 4 hours ago

71 0

GD right,,,father was a drunk, verbally and occasionally physically abusive, my sister and I both still battle demons from a lousy childhood

▶ 9 Replies

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