

# Nurturing Children During Times of Stress

*A Guide to Help Children Bloom*



We all feel stressed sometimes. Some stress is a normal, healthy part of life. It can help us stay safe, try harder, or make us grow stronger. However, intense stress that doesn't go away can be too much to handle without help.

As a parent or caregiver, there are ways you can help your child handle intense stress. Much like a seed that overcomes a difficult environment to grow and flower, you and your child can bloom even in challenging times. This guide has nurturing tips and resources that can protect you and your child from the effects of intense stress. These ideas will also help you connect with your child.

*This guide is for parents and caregivers who want to learn how to bloom even in stressful times while helping children do the same!*

## ORDINARY STRESS CAN HELP US GROW

We all get stressed sometimes and so do our children. Our bodies and brains have special ways to respond to stress that help us handle difficult situations. When a car is about to hit us, our bodies release stress hormones that raise our heart rate and blood pressure.<sup>1</sup> Our brains focus on the stressor, which helps us respond quickly. We might fight, flee, or freeze. Our stress response helps us deal with the normal, everyday stresses in life, such as getting immunizations, speaking in front of others, or starting a new school. Once the stressor is gone or we have adjusted to it, we can relax.

## INTENSE STRESS AFFECTS OUR BODIES AND BRAINS

Sometimes the source of stress doesn't go away or perhaps several stressors happen at the same time. We may get through some challenges, such as an accident or losing a loved one, with the help of supportive friends and family. However, some experiences are so scary, dangerous, violent, and/or ongoing that they can sometimes cause more severe and longer-lasting effects.

When dealing with intense stressors, such as those in Figure 1, some people may experience nightmares, fear, anger, sadness, trouble paying attention, or hopelessness. Some may try to cope with stress by smoking, using drugs, or drinking alcohol. Intense stressors may also have long-term negative impacts on learning, behavior, and physical and mental health. It can be hard on the body to be under stress for a long time.<sup>2,3</sup>

## THE GOOD NEWS: WE CAN HEAL AND BLOOM AT ANY AGE

Fortunately, we all have resilience, or the ability to bounce back from difficulties or adversity. We can become stronger at any age. In fact, almost everyone experiences intense or “toxic” stress<sup>1</sup> at some point. However, “most individuals overcome the adversity and do not develop health or behavioral health problems.”<sup>4</sup>

Parents and caregivers in particular have reason to be hopeful. “If your child has been exposed to adversity, know you're not alone. Roughly half of children in the U.S. are affected. But there's good news: Research shows parents can be the most powerful force in preventing or even reversing the impact of [intense] stress in their children.”<sup>5</sup> We all have room to learn, change, heal, and grow. The rest of this guide will share ideas that can prevent or reverse the effects of intense stress in you and your child.



### Figure 1: EXAMPLES OF INTENSE STRESSORS

Researchers have identified 10 intense childhood stressors called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): child abuse—emotional, physical, and sexual; child neglect—emotional and physical; parental separation or divorce; seeing the mother treated violently; and having someone in the household affected by mental illness, substance misuse, or incarceration.<sup>6</sup>

Research has identified other negative experiences that also have serious effects: community violence<sup>7,8,9</sup>; natural disasters<sup>9</sup>; poverty<sup>7</sup>; war, persecution, or torture<sup>9</sup>; bullying<sup>7,8,9</sup>; and discrimination due to race or ethnicity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/what-complex-trauma-resource-guide-youth-and-those-who-care-about-them>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26963181>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.stresshealth.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV272.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/philadelphia-urban-ace-study>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types>



# PLANT THE SEED



## PREPARE THE SOIL REDUCE AND ADDRESS INTENSE STRESS

It is hard to grow or bloom if you feel physically or emotionally unsafe. When you or your child feels unsafe, you can start by reducing or eliminating the source of stress, if you can, or by reaching out to others who can help you do so. The organizations on the last page of this guide can help you.

Once you and your child feel safe, it's easier to deal with feelings. While some people want to avoid thinking about intense stressors, others find it helpful to talk about them with supportive friends and relatives. Some also find it healing to talk with therapists, doctors, school counselors, coaches, mentors, or spiritual leaders. Taking care of yourself and regulating your body and mind will help you better support your child's healing. You can find self-care ideas in the *Make Time for Yourself* guide at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies). Be kind to yourself on this journey. You and your family can grow stronger and heal, but it might take time. Getting help can make the journey less challenging.

## NURTURE THE SEED POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS PROTECT CHILDREN

Supportive relationships help protect children from the effects of stress. Caring relationships offer hope and support resilience because they are:

- Safe—meaning they are free from fear or harm
- Stable—meaning they are dependable
- Nurturing—meaning they are caring and help children get their needs met as best they can.<sup>10</sup>

Research shows that having safe, stable, nurturing relationships helps children develop healthy brains, grow in physical and mental health, and increase resilience.<sup>10</sup> In fact, “the single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.”<sup>11</sup> Learn more about how just one person can make a difference at [www.betheoneyolo.org](http://www.betheoneyolo.org).

## ADD NUTRIENTS WHAT CHILDREN NEED FROM RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS

What do safe, stable, nurturing relationships look like? We nurture others through love, hugs, support, and guidance. You can help a child feel connected and protected in the following ways:

- Be there for your child. You cannot be replaced by toys or technology. Your child needs human connection, especially with you. Children learn best from parents.<sup>12</sup>
- Actively respond to your child. When your baby babbles or cries or your child talks or reaches out, respond with eye contact, words, or a hug. Responding is important for your child's brain development. It also helps your child communicate and learn social skills. It's okay if you can't respond every time your child reaches out to you, but it's important that you are positive and loving as much as possible.<sup>12</sup>
- Ask questions about things that matter to your child.<sup>13</sup> Listen. Teach them how to talk about hard things, including sadness and anger. See the *Weathering the Storms* and *Talk+Play=Connect* guides for ideas at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies).
- Participate in your child's activities at home, at school, or in the community as much as you can.
- Know your child's friends. Welcome them into your home.<sup>13</sup>
- Tell your child you will always love him or her no matter what.
- Manage your own stress.<sup>13</sup> It's hard to be there for our children when we're stressed. See the *Make Time for Yourself* guide for ideas at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/essentials\\_for\\_childhood\\_framework.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/essentials_for_childhood_framework.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Balancing-ACEs-with-HOPE-FINAL.pdf>

# WATER THE SEED: NURTURING YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD

Research shows that some types of support and care can lessen the effects of stress in children and increase resilience.<sup>14</sup> Think about which of the following ideas you and your child might like to try.

## GET ENOUGH SLEEP<sup>14</sup>

- Sleep can help you manage stress and can help your child do better in school.
- Encourage sleep with dim lights, low noise, and limiting electronics for an hour before bedtime. Light from electronics can interfere with sleep for children and adults.
- Use routines to help get ready for sleep. Take a bath or shower, read (or be read to), cuddle, sing, pray, share what you're thankful for, meditate, or say good-night to the stars or lovies.

## NOURISH YOUR BODY<sup>14</sup>

- Eat together as a family whenever possible!
- Drink more water and less juice and sodas.
- Eat as healthfully as you can, including fruits and vegetables.

## CREATE A POSITIVE HOME ENVIRONMENT<sup>15</sup>

- Stop, look, and listen to each other.
- Play with your child! See the *Talk+Play=Connect* guide for ideas at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies).
- Create routines to reduce stress and increase predictability.
- Take slow, deep breaths when you're stressed. Teach children the stress-relief skills you use. You can practice them together.

## MOVE YOUR BODY<sup>14</sup>

- Exercise or movement can help you and your child manage stress.
- Find time for play and physical activities. Visit a playground, play soccer or catch, go for a walk or bike ride, or have a dance party!
- Do a few yoga poses or some slow, easy stretches. Try Zumba or dancing. Find stress relief exercises at the library or online.

## TAKE CARE OF YOUR MIND

- Find comfort in faith and cultural traditions. Teach these to your child.
- Breathe slowly and pay attention to your breath. Try a free meditation app like *Insight Timer* or *Calm*.<sup>16</sup>

## STRENGTHEN YOUR CHILD'S ABILITY TO SELF-REGULATE AND CONTROL IMPULSES<sup>17</sup>

- Establish routines at home.
- Show your child how to share and take turns.
- Talk to your child about how to handle strong emotions. See the *Weathering the Storms* guide for ideas at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies).
- Let your child practice skills by giving him/her time to play creatively with other children at home or in places like the park.



<sup>14</sup> <https://www.stresshealth.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Balancing-ACEs-with-HOPE-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-apps-worthy-of-your-attention/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>

# FERTILIZE THE SOIL: WHAT ADULTS NEED

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF SO YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF YOUR CHILD

Remember that you can take better care of your child when you take care of yourself and deal with your own stress. You can find self-care ideas in the *Make Time for Yourself* guide at [www.yolokids.org/forfamilies](http://www.yolokids.org/forfamilies). Many ideas take less than 5 minutes. There are even activities you can do with your child!

## RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT FOR ADULTS, TOO!

You also can benefit from caring relationships! A good conversation, a reassuring text, or a hug from a friend or relative can make you feel supported, heard, and valued. Research shows that adults who have more social connections have less stress, feel more emotional support, and have more hope and

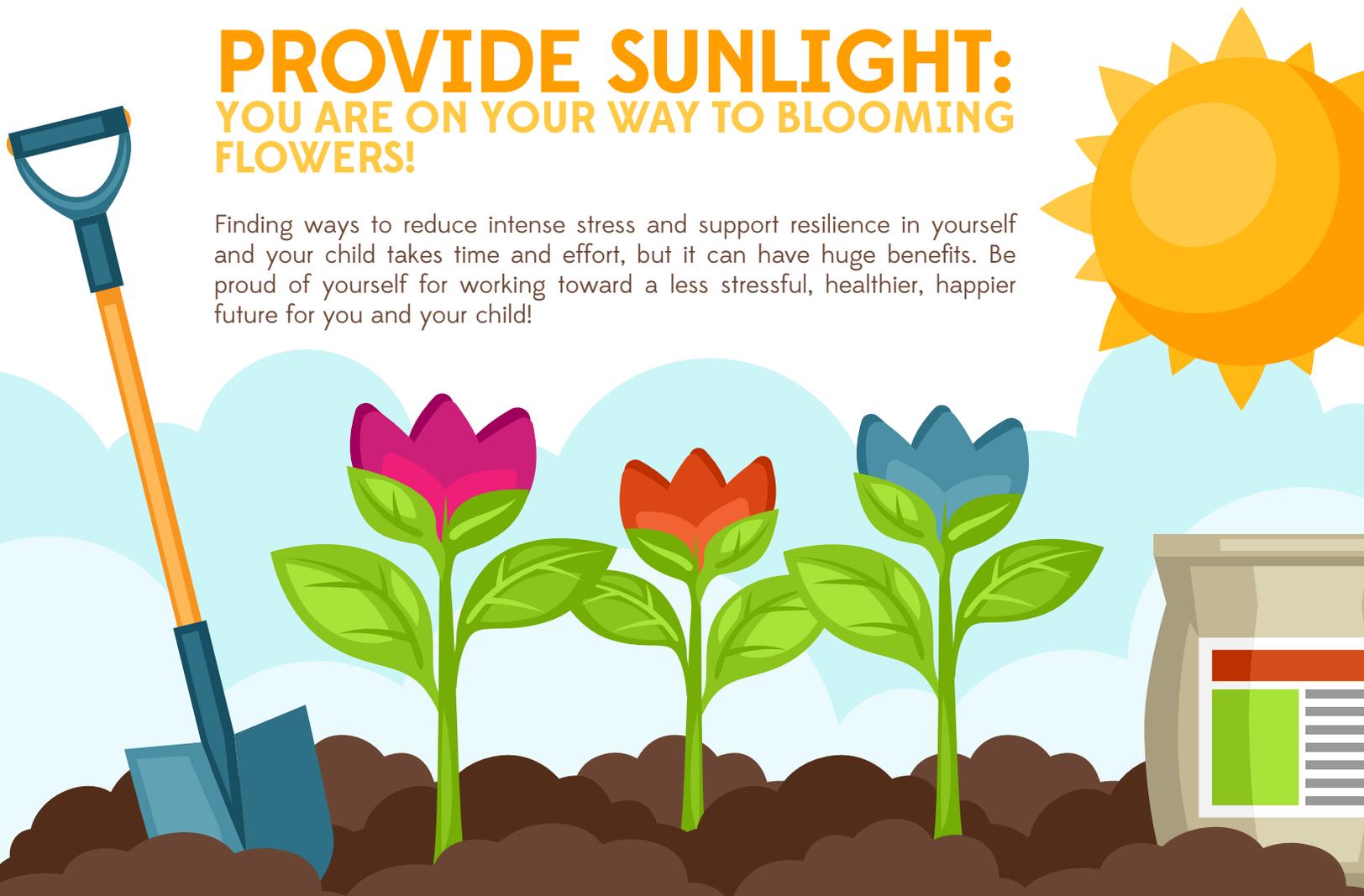
confidence.<sup>18</sup> Social relationships are also important for your physical and mental health.<sup>19</sup> So pick up your phone to call a friend or invite a neighbor to have a cup of coffee!

## PLANT YOUR GARDEN: ENGAGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Engaging in your community can also support resilience. You can find a neighborhood group, form a book club, become part of a sports or religious group, or volunteer at your child's school when possible. You can also find ways to speak up about issues that are important to you. Join a group or start one yourself! It's a great opportunity to engage with others. You can also encourage your child to visit the library, join or form a school group, or enjoy a soccer or basketball game with other children at the park.

## PROVIDE SUNLIGHT: YOU ARE ON YOUR WAY TO BLOOMING FLOWERS!

Finding ways to reduce intense stress and support resilience in yourself and your child takes time and effort, but it can have huge benefits. Be proud of yourself for working toward a less stressful, healthier, happier future for you and your child!



<sup>18</sup> <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3150158/>