

SOS for stressed out teens

 CNN iReport

By Kelly Wallace, CNN

Want to lower your teen's stress?

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Nearly 40% of parents say their kids are stressed from school, according to a new poll
- Growing up with social media means today's teens have less time to truly unplug
- Parents contribute to kids' stress by not knowing how to cope with their own, experts say
- Mindfulness activities such as "quiet time" are helping students lower their stress at school

(CNN) -- Ask parents of teens if their children are more stressed than they were at the same age, and they'll usually tell you, "Absolutely."

"I went to a high school that at the time was considered one of the 10 best high schools in the country, and I think in high school I had less advanced work than they have now," said Nancy Friedman of New York, referring to her 13-year-old twins,

"They are writing real research papers ... much more is expected of them," said Friedman, who is co-founder of a video sharing platform for tweens called [KidzVuz](#).

Teens are feeling the pressure of more demanding curriculum, longer homework sessions, high-stakes testing and more competitive college admissions, according to a [new poll](#).

The poll, conducted by NPR along with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, found that nearly 40% of parents said their high school kids are experiencing a lot of stress from school.

"They have to do their AP (advanced placement) work, they have to be in honors classes, and it's not just enough to be in them, but they have to excel," said Jaclyn Bealer, who spends her summers training teens to be counselors at a camp in Branchville, New Jersey.

"They're just putting so much pressure on themselves to get the absolute best grade possible, and anything under a 90% is failure," said Bealer.

Friedman, the mom of twins, knows that firsthand. Her daughter Rachel "literally will be upset if she gets a 98 instead of 100 on something," she said during a family interview at her home.

"I do not like getting below a 100," Rachel admitted with a laugh.

Social media adds to the stress

Today's teens, unlike when I was growing up, can now compare their academic performance and everything else about their existence to other teens 24 hours a day through updates on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, you name the social network, and that only increases the stress.

"Back in the day, we got a break from our peers after school and on the weekends, but now kids are on social media all day long," said Linda Esposito, a licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist in Los Angeles and host of a blog on psychotherapy called [Talk Therapy Biz](#).

Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and author of the New York Times best-seller "[Emotional Intelligence](#)," says all the social media and advanced technology mean more distractions for kids and less time to truly unplug.

"It used to be that children had time to look at clouds and imagine," said Goleman, whose latest book is "[Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence](#)." "Now they're looking at video games and are competing with some kid in Hong Kong."

Pressure from parents

Teens aren't just feeling stress from academic pressures. Their schedules are also filled with activities and sports after school and on weekends, raising questions for us parents about whether our children are overscheduled and whether we, as parents, are pushing them to do too much.

"There's a little fallacy that we have to enrich our children's experience with every kind of lesson and every kind of sport and every kind of club, and that backfires at a certain point," said Goleman.

Parents who want the best for their kids get into trouble when it becomes like "over-wanting," said Ben Bernstein, a stress psychologist and author of "[A Teen's Guide to Success: How to be Calm, Confident & Focused](#)" as well as a [book about stress-reduction techniques for test-taking](#).

"It could be their own self-esteem is tied into that. It could be that they didn't have the kind of chances that their child had," said Bernstein, who says parents sometimes also have their own hopes and goals for their child that might not mesh with what the child wants to do.

"In that sense, they lose touch with what is happening with their kid," he said.

Bealer, the camp supervisor, says plenty of teens feel like their parents don't give them space to be themselves.

"One of the biggest things that I hear is kids don't necessarily feel that they're being listened to, and that they're being told a lot of what to do," she said.

What they get at camp, she says, is "just having someone to listen to them and not judge them for maybe what their dreams may be or what they're worried about, not minimizing their worries."

Parents also contribute to their teens' stress by not figuring out how to cope with their own stress, said Lori Lite, who created the parenting site [Stress Free Kids](#) after the stresses of parenting were starting to make her sick.

"Many parents demonstrate unhealthy coping mechanisms and live a full-blown stressed out lifestyle," said Lite. "Teens learn and internalize these messages."

CNN's Kelly Wallace talked to parents, teens, psychologists and other experts about why our teens are feeling so stressed.

Now that we know some of the reasons why our teens may be feeling more stressed out than we did as kids, what can we do about it?

We asked [CNN's Facebook community](#) and received a ton of great tips included in [the gallery above](#), everything from Merin Dahlerbruch of Rancho Palos Verdes, California encouraging her 17-year-old to pick up a trumpet to Traci Garcia of Harwood Heights, Illinois, giving her daughter a facial.

We also heard a lot about teaching our children how to relax, through breathing exercises and meditation.

In fact, several schools, including [one in San Francisco](#), have adopted what's called "quiet time," during which students meditate for 10 to 15 minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon. Some schools that have implemented the new approach report a decline in absences and suspensions, and an increase in test scores.

"Regardless of socioeconomic status or race or the type of school, public or private, I think that kids in general need to be taught how to relax, how to breathe appropriately to calm themselves, how to recognize the signs of stress," said Esposito, who uses mindfulness exercises with many of her patients.

Lite, the founder of Stress Free Kids, is a big proponent of breathing, relaxation and visualization exercises for parents and children.

When her daughter went to high school, she said, the principal "began to brag" about the amount of stress teens would experience as freshmen. Her husband wrote her a note asking, "Are they going to teach them how to manage the stress?" she told me.

That's when Lite decided to create a CD for teens to help them manage anxiety and stress.

"If you watch teens take tests or you watch them play video games, if you watch carefully, you will also see them stop breathing," said Bernstein, the stress expert.

"Teaching kids to be calmer in their body by breathing, by learning how to keep themselves grounded, simple techniques of meditation ... things that we know work in terms of stress reduction, we should be teaching that stuff in school and parents should be doing it."

