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KIDS & STRESS – HOW DO THEY HANDLE IT?

A Quarter of Kids Polled Admit to Having Hurt Themselves on Purpose When Stressed, and Over Half Say That Parents Should Help Kids Cope

Milwaukee, WI, and Wilmington, DE, October 12, 2005 – Parents hate to see their children upset. And some parents may wonder just what it is that could be so stressful in a kid’s life – after all, isn’t childhood supposed to be simple and carefree? To better understand how kids handle stress and how parents can help, a recent KidsHealth® KidsPoll asked 875 children ages 9-13 for their thoughts on the topic.

What makes kids feel stressed? Top responses included grades, school, homework (36%); my family (32%); and friends or peers (21%). Kids were asked to rate how often they did certain things when they were stressed or upset. Overall, the KidsPoll found that most kids had more than one coping skill that they used “a lot” or “sometimes.” The most frequently endorsed responses were about using distractions (playing, listening to music, watching TV).

<u>When I Feel Stressed or Upset, I...</u>	<u>% of Kids Who Said “A lot”</u>
1. Play or do something active	52%
2. Listen to music	44%
3. Watch TV or play a video game	42%
4. Talk to a friend	30%
5. Try not to think about it	29%

Source: KidsHealth KidsPoll, "How Kids Handle Stress" 2005

While distractions can be a good thing for minor stressors, children need to have more complex coping tools involving problem-solving and talking with helpful adults when stress is more significant. Surprisingly, “talking to a parent” ranked low (9th on the list), with only 22% of kids surveyed saying this was something they did “a lot” and 28% of kids saying they “never” do this. To download the full chart of the ways kids deal with stress, visit www.nahec.org/KidsPoll.

Some children respond to stress in a troubling way: When asked, “Have you ever hurt yourself on purpose when you were stressed or upset?,” a quarter of children (25%)

responded “yes.” KidsPoll asked those children to share (with a handwritten answer) what they had done.

Their behaviors were grouped into the following categories:

<u>How I Hurt Myself on Purpose When I Was Stressed or Upset</u>	<u>% of Kids Who Responded</u>
1. Bang my head or body on an object	8%
2. Hit, bite, or burn myself	5%
3. Cut or stab myself	4%
4. Other (each less than 1%)	7%

Note: When asked if they have ever hurt themselves, 25% said yes, but only 16.5% gave a valid answer/behavior.

Percentages total to more than 16.5% because some students gave more than one answer.

Source: KidsHealth KidsPoll, “How Kids Handle Stress” 2005

In their own words, here are some of the responses kids provided: *“Pinch myself so I will stop thinking about it,” “Bang my head against the door,” “I tried to make my bones break,” and “I cut myself with my dad’s knife and wanted people to notice me.”*

Why would some children hurt themselves when they are upset? This finding may shock many parents.

D’Arcy Lyness, PhD, a child and adolescent psychologist and medical editor for KidsHealth, notes that:

“Stress, frustration, helplessness, hurt, or anger can be overwhelming emotions for some children. If feelings are strong, and a child doesn’t have a constructive way to express or release the feeling, he or she may feel like a volcano ready to erupt. A child may blame himself when things go wrong – he may feel ashamed, embarrassed, or angry at himself for his part in the situation. Hurting himself on purpose may be a way to express the stress, and blame himself at the same time.”

For some children, self-injury may occur as an isolated incident, while for others it may be part of an ongoing pattern. While it can’t be concluded whether kids who took the poll were describing a one-time incident or pattern of self-harming behavior, there were some other notable findings about kids in this group. Kids who said “yes” when asked if they had ever hurt themselves on purpose when stressed, were also more likely than those who answered “no” to say they lose their temper (36% vs. 19%), keep it to themselves (26% vs. 19%), feel bad about themselves (20% vs. 13%), and eat when stressed (36% vs. 24%). They were also less likely to try to work things out. This suggests that certain kids have a tendency toward poorer coping skills in general and need extra help developing effective coping skills and managing their emotions and behavior during stressful times.

What can parents do? The KidsPoll asked kids, “What should parents do to help kids when they are stressed or upset?” Fifty-seven percent (57%) ranked “talk with them about it” as the #1 thing that parents **should** do to help, even though kids reported that “talk to a parent” was one of the least likely actions they initiated when stressed or upset. While kids may not initiate this, they want parents to approach **them** to talk and help them through difficult times. Kids said that parents should talk with them, comfort them, help them feel better, try to cheer them up, hug them, listen, or just spend time with them when they are stressed or upset.

Dr. Lyness stresses the important role of parents: *“All children are going to feel stress from time to time. While most kids can find effective ways to cope, some kids have significant trouble. It’s so important for parents to teach their children to recognize and express their emotions in healthy ways, and cope with the stress that they experience – to raise a child who knows how to roll with life’s ups and downs, put feelings into words, calm down when needed, think of positive solutions to problems, and bounce back to try again.”*

The KidsHealth KidsPoll on How Kids Handle Stress surveyed 875 children ages 9 to 13 across the U.S. at six member sites of the National Association of Health Education Centers (NAHEC). The survey was conducted by researchers from the Department of Health Education and Recreation, Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Survey questions were drafted with the expertise of the KidsPoll Scientific Advisory Board and Experts: **D’Arcy Lyness, PhD**, Behavioral Health Editor, KidsHealth; **Mary Pat McCartney, M.Ed.**, Elementary Level Vice President, American School Counselor Association; and **Thomas Power**, Professor and Chair, Department of Human Development, Washington State University.

For a list of **tips for parents** to help children develop positive coping skills:

http://www.kidshealth.org/breaking_news/kidspoll_stress.html

For **tips for kids** to help them when they feel stressed or upset:

http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/talk/kidssay/poll_stress.html

For complete survey findings and methodology, or to view other 2005 KidsPolls - including *How Kids Decide What to Eat, Tobacco and Health Literacy* - please visit nahec.org/KidsPoll.

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About the KidsHealth® KidsPoll

A project of the National Association of Health Education Centers (NAHEC), the Nemours Center for Children’s Health Media (creators of KidsHealth.org), and Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Department of Health Education and Recreation (project researchers), the KidsHealth KidsPoll gives children a national platform to share their views on health-related issues that affect them. For more information about the KidsHealth KidsPoll, please visit nahec.org/KidsPoll/.

About the National Association of Health Education Centers (NAHEC)

NAHEC is the national association and network of nonprofit health education centers (HECs) and of other organizations that support children’s health education and provide products and services to HECs. NAHEC member centers reached over 3 million children, teachers, and parents in 2004. HECs use life-size exhibits, advanced audio-visual technology, and specialized, interactive instructional techniques not generally found in conventional classrooms. The curriculum is designed to support school-mandated areas of study. With programs like “Whodunit? - A Forensic Science Camp”, Hummers outfitted with removable organs, and playgrounds modeled after anatomy parts, you’ll see why former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop proclaimed that health education centers “put pizzazz in prevention.” For more information about NAHEC, please visit nahec.org.

About KidsHealth®

KidsHealth creates engaging online, print, and video media about a wide range of health and family issues. KidsHealth has a physician-directed, professional editorial staff – and is the largest resource of online children’s health, behavioral, and developmental information written for three distinct audiences: parents, kids, and teens. In 2004, over 60 million families turned to KidsHealth.org for expert answers – making it the Web’s most accessed site on children’s health. Recent accolades include the **2005 Webby Award for Best Family/Parenting Website**, the **2004 Webby Award for Best Health Website**, the **2004 Parents’ Choice Gold Award**, the **2004 Teachers’ Choice Award for the Family**, and selection as one of the **50 Coolest Websites** by **TIME Magazine**. KidsHealth comes from Nemours, one of the largest nonprofit organizations devoted to children’s health. For more information about KidsHealth, please visit KidsHealth.org.

About Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Department of Health Education & Recreation

Researchers from Southern Illinois University Carbondale’s Department of Health Education and Recreation conduct the KidsHealth KidsPoll. The research team for this project is led by Steve Brown and David A. Birch, faculty members in the Department of Health Education and Recreation. The department offers a bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degree in health education and a bachelor’s and master’s degree in recreation. The health education program is recognized nationally as a leader in school health education and graduate-level teaching and research. Graduates of the program are in health education leadership positions across the country. The department includes 11 health education faculty members and six recreation faculty members. For more information about SIUC, please visit www.siu.edu.