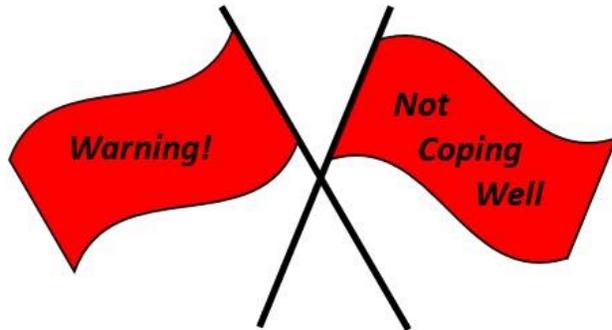


## Red Flag Behaviors - Responding To Clues Kids Aren't Coping

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Experiencing stress is part of growing up. What happens when children feel overwhelmed by stress? If your child is under age six, the result is often a tantrum. They aren't trying to misbehave. They simply have not developed better coping skills.

Older kids may also have meltdowns when they are flooded with strong feelings. They are developing better coping skills but may not have the presence of mind to use those skills.

All kids experience stress. Some turn to talking to friends while others try escaping with drugs. How are your kids coping with their stress?

### Developing Healthy Coping Strategies

Your kids may feel pressure to do well at school, sports and other activities. They also have various social pressures with classmates, friends and family.

Since all kids need to handle stress, developing healthy strategies is important. What do your kids like to do to calm down? Some healthy ways kids cope with stress include:

- Drawing or coloring
- Listening to music
- Playing an instrument
- Meditating
- Talking to someone
- Exercising or going for a walk
- Writing in a journal
- Practicing a sport
- Reading

Ideally your children have many healthy coping skills to choose from. Establishing a daily practice for dealing with stress is helpful.

### Recognizing Unhealthy Coping Behaviors

When your kids are overextended or exhausted, their coping skills may start to crumble. Even though they were coping well a few days ago, they may not be able to do it today.

Some behaviors indicate potentially serious problems in coping with stress. It's natural to want to minimize the possible consequences and hope that things will get better. Don't all teens act like this? Isn't this a phase that will soon pass?

What behaviors may indicate a problem? Red flag behaviors include:

- Spending less time interacting with your family
- Not sleeping well
- Acting secretly
- Eating lots of junk food or seriously restricting eating
- Spending increasingly significant time on digital devices
- Falling grades
- Sexually inappropriate behavior
- Getting caught drinking or using drugs
- Being suspended from school
- Inflicting self-harm

A red flag behavior is any behavior that makes you concerned about what's going on with a child. When you get a gut feeling something isn't right, take it seriously.

A grandma wrote me concerned about "an almost perfect grandson". When I asked about why this is a problem, she explained "He is 16 and suddenly not talking much at all at home. He is so admired at school (class VP) and sports that coaches and teachers write letters home praising him and parents keep telling their kids they want them to be more like Zack. He is involved in sports and everything at school and I feel he has a lot of pressure set upon him. Not sleeping well but his plate is full."

It sounds like Zack might feel pressure to "be perfect". Not sleeping well is a red flag. It's also a red flag that he's not talking as much at home.

She described Zack's parents as loving parents who were very involved in their kids lives. Her description of Zack reminded me of Will Trautwein's story told in [My Living Will: A Father's Story of Loss & Hope](#). Will was doing well by all accounts and then tragically took his life.

The grandma knew of kids in Zack's school who had died from suicide. She had concerns about Zack but didn't want to worry his parents who were already in counseling for their own issues.

Suicide is the [second leading cause of death for kids and youth ages 5 to 24-years-old](#). [Reducing suicide among kids](#) involves acting on these red flags before it's too late.

## **Raising Your Concerns**

When you feel like something isn't right with your child but don't know what's wrong, you need more information. Discussing it with your child in a non-threatening way is a good first step. Find a time alone when neither of you feels rushed. It may be easier to talk while walking or enjoying a bowl of ice cream.

It takes courage to have [difficult conversations](#). You may feel like you don't know what to say. Begin by stating a fact and asking an open-ended question.

For example, pretend your child hasn't been sleeping well the past few nights. You're concerned there's something going on that's upsetting your child and making it hard to sleep. Your conversation might start like this:

You: "I noticed you haven't slept well for the past couple nights. Why do you think that is?"

Child: "I don't know."

You: "I'm concerned you're stressed about something that's getting in your way of sleeping."

Child: "You worry too much."

You: "Maybe ... and it's because I love you so much!"

Child: "Well I'm fine."

You: "I want to believe you are fine but I feel like something isn't quite right. Last night you were quiet at dinner and then immediately went back into your room."

Since you are concerned enough to bring this up, you don't just want to drop it when your child claims to be fine. In this last statement, you've added another fact that bothers you.

At this point, your child may offer some information about what is going on. You cannot force your child to talk. If your child doesn't want to discuss it with you, another option is to set up an appointment with a counselor or other trusted adult.

By starting the conversation, you've shown your child you care deeply and will talk about difficult subjects. If your child is struggling with serious problems, getting professional help is wise. Plan to follow up with regular conversations. Acting when you notice red flags sends a strong message that you are there to help your children through life's challenges.

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