

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE

# Resilience:

## Keys to Helping Law Enforcement Children Thrive



[theIACP.org](http://theIACP.org)

During times of stress, officers and families must work to ensure that law enforcement children and teens have the skills necessary to navigate challenges and embrace healthy coping skills. Children and teens may often worry about the inherent dangers of the law enforcement job: fearing for the safety of their parent may have a negative effect on their emotional health. Events such as public unrest, public health crises, and high-profile incidents involving police may also cause stress for law enforcement children and teens.

Stressful experiences, handled in a positive manner, can be integrated in your child's or teen's life in ways that will contribute to their growth, strength, and perseverance. This resource provides information to assist law enforcement parents with strategies to foster their child's or teen's resilience.



### **Resilience and Its Importance to Overcoming Stress**

Resilience is defined as the process of adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threat, or significant sources of stress.<sup>1</sup> Being resilient means that an individual has the ability to grow following challenges, and building resilience helps children and teens navigate through stressful moments and experiences.

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1 [www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents)



## 10 Keys to Building Child and Teen Resilience

In order for children and teens to thrive during stressful times, law enforcement parents should help to build their individual resilience and coping skills.

The following strategies can help foster healthy coping and resilience.

1. **Stress Management and Healthy Coping.** These activities serve as a foundation for healthy living.
    - Exercise regularly or engage in healthy physical activities
    - Eat balanced meals
      - Minimize sugar and fatty foods
    - Hydrate adequately on a daily basis
      - Avoid sodas and sugary drinks
      - Drink plenty of water
    - Ensure your child or teen gets plenty of sleep according to his/her age<sup>2</sup>
  2. **Relaxation Strategies.** These activities increase the relaxation response and decrease the stress response. There are many free applications that can help guide exercises.
    - Practice mindfulness exercises<sup>3</sup>
    - Perform deep breathing exercises<sup>4</sup>
    - Exercise progressive muscle relaxation techniques
      - **For younger children,** make it a game, imagining they are spaghetti or jello.
      - **For older children or teens,** practice a focused relaxation exercise together.<sup>5</sup>
- Utilize spiritual or faith-based exercises

2 [https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about\\_sleep/how\\_much\\_sleep.html](https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html)

3 <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/mindful-exercises.html>

4 <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/mindful-exercises.html>

5 <https://Therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/progressive-muscle-relaxation-script>

3. **Social Connections.** Social support is associated with positive health outcomes and resilience to stress.<sup>6</sup>
  - Encourage your child to connect with friends through fun activities and foster connections with family members to build a supportive network and community.
4. **Healthy Communication.** Communicating and expressing feelings are healthy ways to cope with stress. Children and teens must feel supported and receive reminders that they are not alone. Parents should create a safe environment for children and teens to discuss their feelings.
  - Encourage healthy expression of emotions by modeling and normalizing open two-way discussion.
  - Help children and teens to identify and express their feelings. Check in with them to ensure they are hearing what you are saying, and that you are hearing what they are intending to communicate.
5. **Creative Expression.** Encourage your child or teen to draw or write to express how they feel. According to research, writing about feelings is associated with positive health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Drawing and writing can serve as therapeutic outlets for children and teens to express their frustrations, anxieties, fears, and stressors in a safe and natural way.
6. **Optimism and Gratitude.**
  - Foster an *attitude of optimism and a heart of gratitude* through varied activities and role modeling.



**Optimism** is focusing on the positive and expecting the best outcomes.



**Gratitude** is focusing on what is good in life and being thankful for things we have.<sup>8</sup>

- Encourage your child or teen to maintain a daily gratitude journal or write a thank you note to someone. Families may also consider practicing gratitude at the dinner table by sharing a positive experience from the day. This will

6 [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE\\_4\\_5\\_35.pdf](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE_4_5_35.pdf)

7 <https://www.apa.org/topics/children-teens-stress>

8 <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/gratitude.html>

enable your child or teen to focus on what is going right in their life rather than challenges they may be facing.

- Assist your child with developing positive self-talk to navigate difficult times. Promote phrases such as: “I can do this”... “tomorrow will be a better day”... “I made it through before so I can do this again.”

7. **Deliberate Acts of Kindness.** Acts of kindness are effective ways to help your child or teen build confidence and connections by shifting focus to someone else in need rather than dwelling on their own situation.<sup>9</sup>

- Help your child or teen do yardwork for an elderly neighbor, donate books or old clothes, or participate in community volunteer work.

8. **Realistic Goal Setting.** Setting realistic goals can help decrease frustration and achieve feelings of accomplishment, which helps build resilience.<sup>10</sup>

- Help your child or teen examine their goals and map out a plan to accomplish achievable short-term goals to increase feelings of success and promote confidence. These goals can be set for school, music, sports, or at home.

9. **Healthy Problem-Solving.** Children and teens need assistance in developing solutions to problems. Collaborative problem-solving will instill a genuine sense of support and comfort and help your child or teen feel less isolated.

- Assist your child or teen with creating viable solutions to problems and to address underlying feelings in healthy ways such as journaling, exercising, or meditating. It is generally agreed that those who face problems cope better than those who avoid or deny them.<sup>11</sup>

10. **Family Bonding Activities.** Routinely spending quality time with family and engaging in fun activities or meaningful projects contributes to building resilience. These activities create a sense of connection and emotional bonding that are essential for the growth and development of your child or teen. Family activities can help your child or teen look forward to a greater purpose and accomplishment.

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9 [www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](http://www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents)

10 [www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](http://www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents)

11 Ginsburg, Kenneth. (2015). 3rd edition. Building Resilience in Children and Teens: American Academy of Pediatrics

→ Participate in healthy family activities such as:

- Family projects such as planting a garden or working on a family tree
- Outdoor family fun, i.e. hiking or walking, playing frisbee at the park, or having a picnic at the beach
- Family movie or game nights
- Video chat and other activities, thus minimizing social media and internet activities



## The Impact of Chronic Stress on Children and Teens

Chronic stress has been found to have negative effects on health and wellbeing. Chronic stress can affect a child's or teen's school performance and social connection with peers. It can also potentially have detrimental effects on health resulting in anxiety, depression, and physical illness. Identifying stress and implementing effective ways to manage stress can minimize these potential negative effects.<sup>12</sup>



## Identifying Signs of Stress in Children and Teens

Children and teens exhibit stress in varied ways. Below are some signs of stress in children and teens.<sup>13</sup>

- Changes in behavior, i.e. suddenly quiet when normally talkative
- Changes in mood, i.e. irritability or anger
- Sleep disturbances, i.e. sleeping more or less, waking frequently
- Changes in eating patterns
- Regressive behaviors in younger children, i.e. bedwetting
- Increased separation anxiety for younger children
- Physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches
- Social withdrawal from close friends or family

12 [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE\\_4\\_5\\_35.pdf](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE_4_5_35.pdf)

13 [www.apa.org/topics/children-teens-stress](http://www.apa.org/topics/children-teens-stress)



## Managing Stress with Your Children and Teens

- **Think.** Think about what to say and share how stress can affect the body both emotionally and physically.
- **Talk.** Talk about how stress can affect mood, behavior, and performance. Most importantly, discuss how to manage stress and brainstorm positive coping skills.
- **Acknowledge.** Acknowledge that you have noticed some changes in your child's or teen's behaviors.
- **Demonstrate.** Demonstrate concern for your child's or teen's experiences and feelings of stress.
- **Validate.** Validate your child's or teen's feelings and experiences.
- **Share.** Share stories about stressful times in your life and how you have successfully managed stress in the past.
- **Revisit old challenges.** Revisit stressful times in the past and discuss how your child or teen overcame those challenges. Ask your child or teen to think about how those past challenges may be helpful now. What coping strategies could they use? Encourage problem-solving and critical thinking with older children and teens.
- **Reassure.** Reassure your child or teen that everything will be okay.
- **Plan.** Discuss a plan together to navigate the situation.



## How Can Law Enforcement Agencies Help Strengthen Families?

Law enforcement agencies can strengthen families through encouraging programs that increase officer resilience, and developing and hosting activities that encourage resilience for families:

- Family resilience fun days
- Resilience workshops for families
- Social support groups for spouses
- Online family support groups with resources
- Marital/couples and family counseling services
- Opportunities for family members to seek support services independently or confidentially

## Available Family Resources

- [www.theiacp.org/OSW](http://www.theiacp.org/OSW)
- <https://www.theiacp.org/ICPRLawenforcementfamily>
- <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-children-exposed-to-violence-toolkit>
- <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/mindful-exercises.html>
- [https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about\\_sleep/how\\_much\\_sleep.html](https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html)
- <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/kids-healthy-hydration#1>
- [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE\\_4\\_5\\_35.pdf](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921311/pdf/PE_4_5_35.pdf)
- <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/in-praise-of-gratitude>

This publication is one in a series.  
For more officer safety and wellness resources,  
please visit: [www.theiacp.org/OSW](http://www.theiacp.org/OSW)

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