

# The Parent and Family Engagement Connection

## Home & School

*"Together We Can Make a Difference"*

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Skip Forsyth

**The annual winter holiday is gladly welcomed by most kids. No school. Sleep in. No homework. Hang out with friends. More time for video games.**

The annual winter holiday is celebrated in a variety of ways. In addition to Thanksgiving and Christmas, there is Chanukah, Kwanzaa, New Year's, and other special days. Each commemorates a memorable event. A host of family and community traditions are connected to these annual celebrations. But, these occasions typically require an expense of time and money which is already in short supply for many families.

For parents and families, the winter holidays can be stressful. Who will take care of kids while I go to work? How do I know they are safe if left home alone? Kids want to go to the movies and go bowling and buy new electronic gadgets – how do I tell them there is more month than money?

So much energy is expended on advertising and marketing and commercializing the holidays. I encourage you to refocus, not spending but sharing.

- ◆ Share your joy of baking by giving to others some of your favorite holiday treats.
- ◆ Share your energy by washing the car of an elderly neighbor or helping to clean their house for the holiday.
- ◆ Share your time playing games with your kids or grandkids or watching one of their favorite movies, or if the weather is warm enough have a picnic or fly a kite.
- ◆ Share your creativity and fun by making silly selfies of the family and sending them to friends and family, even making a silly-selfie-video.
- ◆ Share your love for family by creating home-made cards out of construction paper or by placing sticky notes around the house and in drawers and on mirrors and in cabinets and on cereal boxes, etc. that say things like:

*"Mom, your cookies are the best!"*

*"Dad, thanks for playing catch or coaching my soccer team."*

*"Son, your stories always make me smile."*

*"Daughter, when you sit and listen to grandma and hold her hand, I cry."*

The winter holiday can be frantic but try to slow down. Focus on activities that can build memories for a lifetime rather than stuff that is quickly forgotten.

I wish for you a happy holiday, sharing and caring for one another.



*Slow down, it's not too late  
Leave the dishes, they can wait  
He's asking you if you want to play  
Don't say no and turn away.  
  
I must cook your tea now little one  
I have to finish cleaning now I have begun.  
He walks away, you carry on  
He'll soon stop asking, he'll soon be grown.  
  
He pulls your trousers and says please play  
But you're trying to put his things away  
I can't right now, my precious one  
Just wait a while and I will be done.  
  
But later comes and it's time for tea  
Bath time next and bed you see  
You must learn that he won't stay  
This little for long and want you to play.  
  
Put down the saucepan and run outside  
You can count while he tries to hide.  
He'll remember this and so will you  
These precious moments are oh, so few.*

*Sophie Harrington*

# HELPING YOUR CHILD MANAGE TEST ANXIETY



## WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

Test anxiety is the uneasiness or apprehension that a student feels before, during or after a test because of worry or fear of failure. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time; in fact, low levels of anxiety can motivate students to study and perform well. However, when anxiety interferes with test-taking and learning it can cause students to “blank out” or have trouble paying attention, limiting their ability to think clearly and do their best work. The good news is that parents can help their children manage test anxiety.

## WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

Some students report physical symptoms including butterflies, cold or clammy hands, headaches, nausea, being hot or cold, or feeling faint. Others report feeling like they want to cry or even leave the room and not take the test. Still others feel angry or helpless.

## What Can I Do As A Parent?

### The Practical First Steps

- Make sure your child has enough sleep, eats a healthy breakfast and gets to school on time.
- Make sure your child has the needed school supplies (notebooks, pencils, etc.).
- Doing well on a test is easier if a student has been consistently completing school assignments, including studying or reading. Encouraging your child to complete homework each day is important and helpful.

### What Should I Avoid Doing?

- Avoid giving excessive reassurance, such as repeatedly saying, “You’ll do great!” Too much reassurance causes anxious children to seek to discredit the parent’s opinion.
- Avoid telling your child exactly what to do. It is more useful to ask your child to come up with a realistic plan for studying and taking the test. Successful completion of the plan enhances the child’s feeling of control and accomplishment, and this will decrease anxiety. Build in some relaxation time to your child’s plan.
- Don’t ignore the problem by hoping it will go away by itself.
- Don’t be impatient (“Just take the test and get over it!”).
- Don’t allow the child to avoid the situation (“You can stay home today”).

### Specific suggestions

- Motivate your child to want to take a test. You can do this by reinforcing their efforts, including the studying and homework tasks, rather than focusing on having to make a certain grade.
- Help your child reduce fear and anxiety. This can be accomplished with enthusiasm, praise and, at times, small rewards for giving their best effort in spite of feeling worried.
- Anxious children tend to have many negative thoughts (“I’m going to fail this test” or “I do badly on every test”). You can teach your child to challenge these ideas by looking at the evidence against each negative thought (“Do you really fail every test? What is likely to happen if you study?”). Finally, help your child to find a more optimistic thought to use whenever the negative ones arise (“When I study I do pass tests”).
- Teach your child ways to relax through simple techniques such as deep breathing and meditation. Relaxation is a skill that requires learning and practice, so keep the relaxation practices short and simple. Make it a family activity, where everyone takes the time to breathe deeply; you can teach by example. Use the techniques yourself, for example, when you become frustrated while driving. Encourage your child to practice in real life situations (e.g., before going to a stressful family event).

## When should I seek professional help?

It is normal to have some degree of test anxiety. If the problem persists or the symptoms are interfering with school performance, help is available. Reducing test anxiety alone will not be effective unless children know how to study and take tests. Teaching study skills and test-taking strategies are effective in helping students perform better in school. Parents may also want to seek counseling for their child.

Author: Lori Evans, Ph.D., NYU Child Study Center  
Helping Your Child Manage Test Anxiety

# TEEN SUICIDE



- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15 to 24 year-olds.
- For some teens, suicide may appear to be a solution to their problems and stress.
- Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders.
- Many of the signs and symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression and parents should be aware of these signs.
- If a child or adolescent says, **I want to kill myself, always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance.**

**If you are in a crisis and need immediate help call:  
The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

Suicides among young people continue to be a serious problem. Each year in the United States, thousands of teenagers commit suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15 to 24 year-olds, and the sixth leading cause of death for 5 to 14 year-olds.

Teenagers experience strong feelings of stress, confusion, self-doubt, pressure to succeed, financial uncertainty, and other fears while growing up. For some teenagers, divorce, the formation of a new family with step-parents and step-siblings, or moving to a new community can be very unsettling and can intensify self-doubts. For some teens, suicide may appear to be a solution to their problems and stress.

Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders. The child or adolescent needs to have his or her illness recognized and diagnosed, and appropriate treatment plans developed. When parents are in doubt whether their child has a serious problem, a psychiatric examination can be very helpful. Many of the symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression.

### Parents should be aware of the following signs of adolescents who may try to kill themselves:

- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- Violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- Drug and alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance
- Marked personality change
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Not tolerating praise or rewards

### A teenager who is planning to commit suicide may also:

- Complain of being a bad person or feeling rotten inside
- Give verbal hints with statements such as: I won't be a problem for you much longer, Nothing matters, It's no use, and I won't see you again
- Put his or her affairs in order, for example, give away favorite possessions, clean his or her room, throw away important belongings, etc.
- Become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression
- Have signs of psychosis (hallucinations or bizarre thoughts)

If a child or adolescent says, **I want to kill myself, or I'm going to commit suicide**, always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional. People often feel uncomfortable talking about death. However, asking the child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Rather than putting thoughts in the child's head, such a question will provide assurance that somebody cares and will give the young person the chance to talk about problems.

If one or more of these signs occurs, parents need to talk to their child about their concerns and seek **professional help** from a physician or a qualified mental health professional. With support from family and appropriate treatment, children and teenagers who are suicidal can heal and return to a more healthy path of development.

[https://www.aacap.org?AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Teen-Suicide-010.aspx](https://www.aacap.org?AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Teen-Suicide-010.aspx)

## 14 Ideas to Encourage Your Kids to Get Into the Spirit of Giving During the Holidays

*Giving makes us happy. The act of giving is the universal way we show appreciation, gratitude, compassion, and strengthen bonds with others. We learn early in our lives that it feels good to give. Who doesn't enjoy seeing a person's eyes light up and their smile widen with joy as we give them a gift?*

*A recent poll has shown that most Americans truly want a holiday season with less materialism, and more focus on family and caring for others, not giving and receiving gifts. In our consumer-driven society, the push has always been for us to buy and give more "stuff". How can you encourage your kids to get in the spirit of giving back to others during the holiday season? Here's a list of fun and heartfelt ways you can encourage your kids!*

### *1. Give a heartfelt gift to local first responders.*

Take handmade goodies, like cookies or a pan of brownies to a local fire, police, or EMS department in your community. Show your appreciation for the men and women who help us in our hours of greatest need!

### *2. Take a meal to a family in need.*

Do you know of anyone in your neighborhood or place of worship who could use a nice hot home-cooked meal or be treated to some great takeout? Think of families that have just had a new baby, or someone struggling with illness, or who have recently experienced a loss (via [momentsaday.com](http://momentsaday.com)).

### *3. Write a card to servicemen overseas.*

This can be a great opportunity to share the important concepts of freedom and the military with young children.

### *4. Go caroling at a local retirement or nursing home.*

Always call before you go, but most homes are happy to have children come entertain, give smiles, and hugs to the residents.

### *5. Create a family giving box.*

Designate a cardboard box or plastic container that your kids can fill with toys, clothes, and books that they've outgrown. Donate the items to a local shelter, the Salvation Army or Goodwill.



### *6. Have animal lovers in your house?*

Offer to walk or give a bath to an elderly person's dog. As a family, volunteer at a local pet shelter or donate handmade cat and dog toys.

### *7. Offer to pick up groceries for a neighbor.*

Who doesn't know a neighbor or family who could use a little break? A single mom, a homebound widow, a family going through a difficult time. If you can't think of anyone, ask your place of worship, a shelter or local clinic who could use a little extra help! Have your kids help check off the lists, placing items in the cart, and unloading the car.

### *8. Pick up litter.*

Call your local parks and recreation or just find a street in your town that could really use a little tidying up! This makes a great outdoor family project. Just make sure you do it safely and carefully.

### *9. Make homemade cards and pictures.*

Get out the markers, crayons and paper and make homemade cards or just have the kids color pretty pictures. Drop them off at a rehabilitation center or hospital.

### *10. Grab a broom, shovel, or rake!*

Give your kids a broom, shovel or rake and put them to work! Sweep porches, rake leaves, or shovel snow for the elderly, the sick, single moms, or those experiencing illness.

Author: Julie Welles  
Excerpt from original article posted on [SparkMission.com](http://SparkMission.com)

*"For a community to be whole and healthy, it must be based on people's love and concern for each other."*

*-Millard Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity*

## Safety Tips For Parents

### TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN

Keeping the lines of communication open with your children and teens is an important step to keeping involved in their schoolwork, friends, and activities. Communicating with your child does not have to be a game of 20 Questions—ask open-ended questions and use phrases such as:

"Tell me more" and "What do you think?" Phrases like these show your children that you are listening and that you want to hear more about their opinions, ideas, and how they view the world. Initiate important discussions with your children—about violence, smoking, drugs, sex, drinking, and death—even if the topics are difficult or embarrassing. Don't wait for your children or teens to come to you.

### SET CLEAR RULES AND LIMITS FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Children need clearly defined rules and limits set for them so that they know what is expected of them and the consequences for not complying. When setting family rules and limits, be sure that children understand the purpose behind the rules and be consistent in enforcing them.

Discipline is more effective if children have been involved in establishing the rules and, oftentimes, in deciding the consequences. Work together to set limits for behavior at home and at school. Remember to be fair and flexible—as your children grow older, they become ready for expanded rights and changes in rules and limits. Parents also need to model appropriate and positive behaviors. When parents say one thing and do another, they lose credibility with their children. Show your children through your actions how to adhere to rules and regulations, be responsible, have empathy toward others, control anger, and manage stress.

### KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Knowing what's normal behavior for your son or daughter can help you recognize even small changes in behavior and give you an early warning that something is troubling your child. Sudden changes—from subtle to dramatic—should alert parents to potential problems. These could include withdrawal from friends, decline in grades, abruptly quitting sports or clubs the child had previously enjoyed, sleep disruptions, eating problems, evasiveness, lying, and chronic physical complaints (stomachache or headaches). Know your child well and know the early warning signs.



### DON'T BE AFRAID TO PARENT; KNOW WHEN TO INTERVENE

Parents need to step in and intervene when children exhibit behavior or attitudes that could potentially harm them or others. It's okay to be concerned when you notice warning signs in a child, and it's even more appropriate to do something about those concerns. Concerned parents should seek a diagnosis from a doctor, school counselor, or other mental health professional trained to assess young people. And you don't have to deal with problems alone—the most effective interventions have parent, school, and health professionals working together to provide ongoing monitoring and support.

### STAY INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

Show your children that you believe education is important and that you want your children to do their best in school by being involved in their education. Get to know your child's teachers and help them get to know you and your child. Communicate with your child's teachers throughout the school year, not just when problems arise. Stay informed of school events, class projects, and homework assignments. Attend all parent orientation activities and parent-teacher conferences. Volunteer to assist with school functions and join your local PTA. Help your children seek a balance between schoolwork and outside activities.

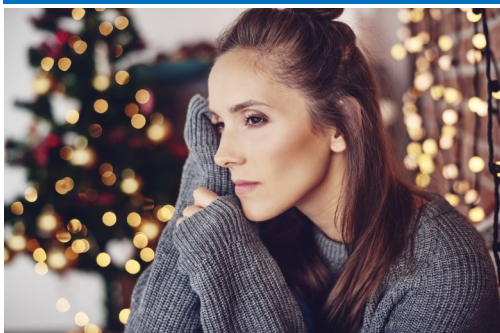
Parents also need to support school rules and goals. Find out about the school's policies for discipline and procedures for handling emergencies such as fire, evacuations, severe weather, power outages, injuries and illness, or other dangers that might face students at school. Know the procedure for contacting students during the day or for having adults visit the school building. Know the route your student will take to and from school and throughout the school building during the day. Staying involved in your child's school will help you feel more a part of your child's education.

### JOIN YOUR PTA OR A VIOLENCE PREVENTION COALITION

All parents, students, school staff, and members of the community need to be a part of creating safe school environments for our children. Many PTAs and other school-based groups are working to identify the problems and causes of school violence and possible solutions for violence prevention.

National Crime Prevention Council, [www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)

# 9 Tips to Cope with Holiday Depression



*Some measures you can take to cope with the holiday blues include:*

- Make plans in advance, so you know how and with whom your holidays will be spent. Uncertainty and putting off decision-making add enormous stress.
- Shop early and allow time to wrap and mail packages to avoid the shopping crunch.
- Ask for help from your family and children. Women tend to think they have to do everything, when a team effort can be more fun.
- Shame prevents people from being open about gift-giving when they can't afford it. Instead of struggling to buy a gift, let your loved ones know how much you care and would like to, but can't afford it. That intimate moment will relieve your stress and nourish you both.
- Don't allow perfectionism to wear you down. Remember it's being together and goodwill that matters.
- Make time to rest and rejuvenate even amid the pressure of getting things done. This will give you more energy.
- Research has shown that warmth improves mood. If you're sad or lonely, treat yourself to a warm bath or cup of hot tea.
- Spend time alone to reflect and grieve, if necessary. Pushing down feelings leads to depression. Let yourself feel. Then do something nice for yourself and socialize.
- Don't isolate. Reach out to others who also may be lonely. If you don't have someone to be with, volunteer to help those in need. It can be very uplifting and gratifying.

The stress of the holidays triggers sadness and **depression** for many people. This time of year is especially difficult because there's an expectation of feeling merry and generous. People compare their emotions to what they assume others are experiencing or what they're supposed to feel and then think that they alone fall short. They judge themselves and feel like an outsider. There are a host of things that add to stress and difficult emotions during the holidays:

**Finances.** Not enough money or the fear of not having enough to buy gifts leads to sadness and guilt. The stress of financial hardship during this economic downturn is often compounded by shame. When you can't afford to celebrate it can feel devastating.

**Stress.** The stress of shopping and planning family dinners when you're already overworked and tired can be overwhelming.

**Loneliness.** A whopping 43 percent of Americans are single, and 27 percent of Americans live alone. When others are with their families, it can be very painful for those who are alone. Seventeen percent of singles are over 65, when health, age, and mobility can make it more difficult to enjoy yourself.

**Grief.** Missing a deceased loved one is painful at any age, but seniors have more reasons to grieve.

**Estrangement.** When you're not speaking to a relative, family get-togethers can usher in feelings of sadness, guilt, resentment, or inner conflict about whether to communicate.

**Divorce.** If you're newly divorced, the holidays may remind you of happier times and accentuate your grief. It's especially difficult for adult children of divorce who have to balance seeing two sets of parents. The stress is multiplied for married children who have three or even four sets of parents to visit.

**Pleasing.** Trying to please all of your relatives – deciding what to get, whom to see, and what to do – can make you feel guilty and like you're not doing enough, which leads to depression.

The signs of depression are feelings of sadness, worthlessness or guilt, crying, loss of interest in usual activities, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, social withdrawal, and changes in **sleep**, weight, or appetite. If these symptoms are severe or continue for a few weeks, more than the holidays may be the cause. Seek professional help.

Article used with permission from: Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Darlene Lancer is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and expert author on relationships and codependency. She's counseled individuals and couples for 30 years and coaches internationally.



**Let whatever you do today  
BE ENOUGH.**

## 5 Tips for Raising “Happy” Successful Children

Without a doubt, parenting is simultaneously the most rewarding and difficult job we have as adults. As a child psychiatrist and mom, I am always asked if I find it easier to parent given my profession. I always respond by saying, “I was the perfect parent until I had children!”

I am also universally asked about how to raise “happy” children. I always pause before I attempt to answer this question. Happiness is fleeting and one of the best things we can do as parents is to allow our children to experience and cope with negative emotions such as sadness, anger, disappointment, and frustration. The real question, I believe, is how to raise successful children with a good sense of self worth.

### *Here are my top five tips for raising a “happy” successful child!*

**1. Ensure that your child feels loved & valued.** Give hugs generously. Be patient. Be attentive. Have a warm attitude. Appreciate the uniqueness of your child. Offer support and structure to provide security. A child that feels loved and valued is a child that feels understood, acknowledged, and respected. This creates a connected child who will be able to foster relationships with peers and the community.

**2. Lead by example.** Studies have shown that parents are the most significant influence on the emotional and moral development of their children, and our children listen and observe all that we do. Be the best person you can be as a parent and model integrity. Show empathy and help your child label and validate their own emotions. Your child’s capacity for empathy and his or her ability to effectively communicate feelings with others will be invaluable for future success.

**3. Focus on building resilience in your child by allowing for success and failure.** When your child does something well, praise something within the child’s control. Compliment your child’s effort and perseverance, as opposed to the achievement itself. Mastery of new skills builds more self-esteem than praise. Also, allow your child to fail, and even to feel disappointment. Allowing for mistakes provides your child with the opportunity to learn creative solutions, have the courage to face problems, and have the confidence necessary to take risks.

**4. Focus on your child’s physical health.** Healthy eating habits and physical activity are essential components of a healthy, successful lifestyle. As a parent, be a role model of healthy eating and physical activity. The future success of your child depends not just on social-emotional development, but also on healthy physical development.

**5. Encourage creative play.** Kids of all ages love to play, and play is vital for healthy brain development. Young children learn best through meaningful play experiences. These experiences promote creativity, problem solving, and communication. For older kids and teens, play is important for promoting independence, developing competence, and relieving stress. Playing is also fun, and fun is essential for true success.

Vanita Braver, MD is a mom, a Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, children’s book author of the “Teach Your Children Well” (see [www.drvanitabraver.com](http://www.drvanitabraver.com))

*“Be happy, and a reason will come along.”*



# 8 Tips for Improving Your Self-Esteem

*Self-esteem is your opinion of yourself and your abilities. It can be high, low or somewhere in-between. While everyone occasionally has doubts about themselves, low self-esteem can leave you feeling insecure and unmotivated.*

1. **Be nice to yourself.** Make an effort to be kind to yourself and, if you do slip up, try to challenge any negative thoughts.
2. **Be yourself.** Comparing yourself to other people is a sure-fire way to start feeling crummy. Try to focus on your own goals and achievements, rather than measuring them against someone else's.
3. **Get movin'.** Exercise is a great way to increase motivation, practice setting goals and build confidence.
4. **Nobody's perfect.** Always strive to be the best version of yourself, but it's also important to accept that perfection is an unrealistic goal.
5. **Remember that everyone makes mistakes.** You've got to make mistakes in order to learn and grow.
6. **Focus on what you can change.** Try to focus your energy on identifying the things that are within your control and seeing what you can do about them.
7. **Do what makes you happy.** If you spend time doing the things you enjoy, you're more likely to think positively. Try to schedule in a little you-time every day.
8. **Surround yourself with a supportive squad.** Find people who make you feel good about yourself and avoid those who tend to trigger your negative thinking.



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