

# Helping Young Children Manage Stress: Tools for Resiliency

The Early Years Conference 2016

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THE PSYCHOLOGY  
FOUNDATION  
OF CANADA

LA FONDATION  
DE PSYCHOLOGIE  
DU CANADA



# Welcome and Introductions



*A child's ability to cope with stress in the early years has consequences for physical and emotional health through out life.*

- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005)

# The Psychology Foundation of Canada

- ❑ National registered charity dedicated to supporting parents and strengthening families (founded in 1974)
- ❑ Led by senior psychologists
- ❑ Provides research-based current materials and resources
- ❑ Develops training opportunities for professionals
- ❑ Has an array of other research-backed programs and resources

# Our Mission

## Confident Kids, Productive Adults

Practical, evidence-based programs spanning critical developmental stages

**Birth - Make the Connection**



**School years - Kids Have Stress Too! and Parenting for Life**



**Adults - Stress Strategies**



**Toddlerhood - Make the Connection & Parenting for Life**



**Adolescence - Stress Lessons & Parenting for Life**

# Workshop Goals



- Review the physiology of stress on the developing brain
- Consider how stress and resiliency are interrelated
- Learn some promising strategies adults and children can use to manage stress

## So we can help children ...

- Gain a sense of control
- Learn how to relax
- Develop a “can do” attitude
- Build capacity for self-regulation
- Improve executive functioning



Time to reflect ....

**“Resiliency = Stress + Support”**



# Why Foster Resilience?

*Resilience embraces the ability of the child to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity and trauma, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect.*

*- Brooks, R. & Goldstein, S. (2001)*



# Core Competencies of Resilience

The research on resiliency shows that the core competencies identified as necessary to build resilience are the same ones that are useful in learning to manage stress. These include:

- Emotional regulation
- Impulse control
- Causal analysis
- Empathy
- Realistic optimism
- Self-efficacy
- Reaching out

# THE AMAZING RACE





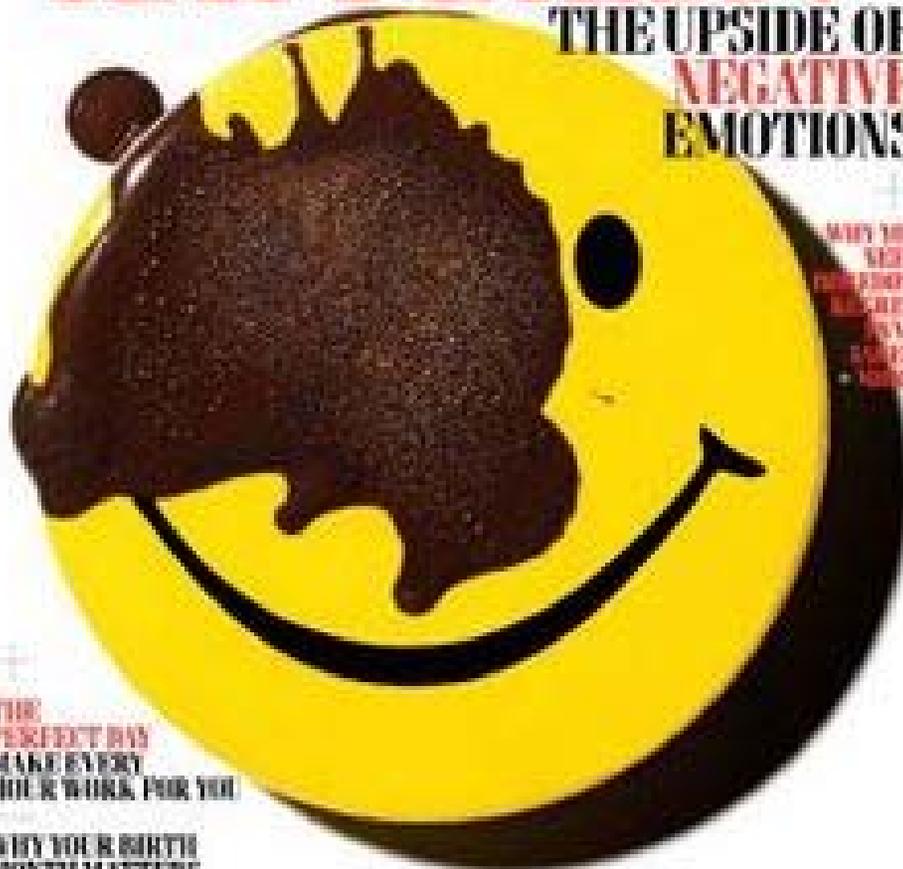
**“STRESSED”**  
is  
**“DESSERTS”**  
spelled  
backwards

WHY WOMEN STALK • HOW TO TALK TO SMORFS • HITTING IT BIG BY 25

# Psychology Today

## HAPPINESS?

THE UPSIDE OF  
NEGATIVE  
EMOTIONS



WHY YOU  
NEED  
TO STOP  
WORRYING  
ABOUT  
YOUR  
FUTURE

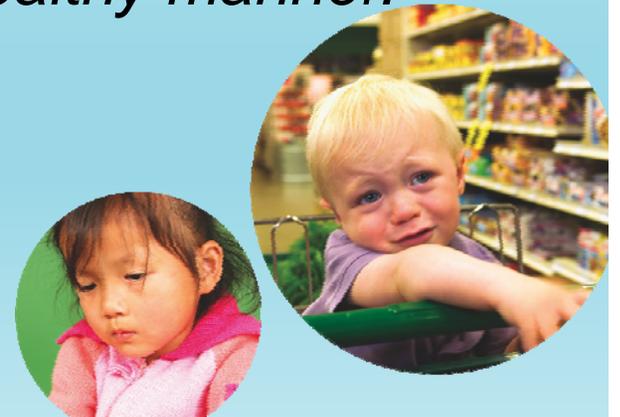
THE  
PERFECT  
MAN  
MAKE EVERY  
HOUR WORK FOR YOU

WHY YOUR BIRTH  
MONTH MATTERS

# Let's Talk About Stress

*As children grow into mature adults, they will inevitably be faced with challenges, both predictable and unpredictable. These challenges provide children with the opportunity to learn how to effectively manage stress, regulate emotions, and develop the social, behavioural, and cognitive coping resources needed to overcome these obstacles. The presence of sensitive and responsive caregivers can help equip children with the tools needed to handle stress in a healthy manner.*

- Dr. Megan Gunnar



# Stress “101”

- Stress can be beneficial, tolerable or harmful
- Stress that is beneficial helps us feel energized, motivated, excited and can encourage us to develop effective coping strategies to deal with challenges, and this in turn increases our resilience.

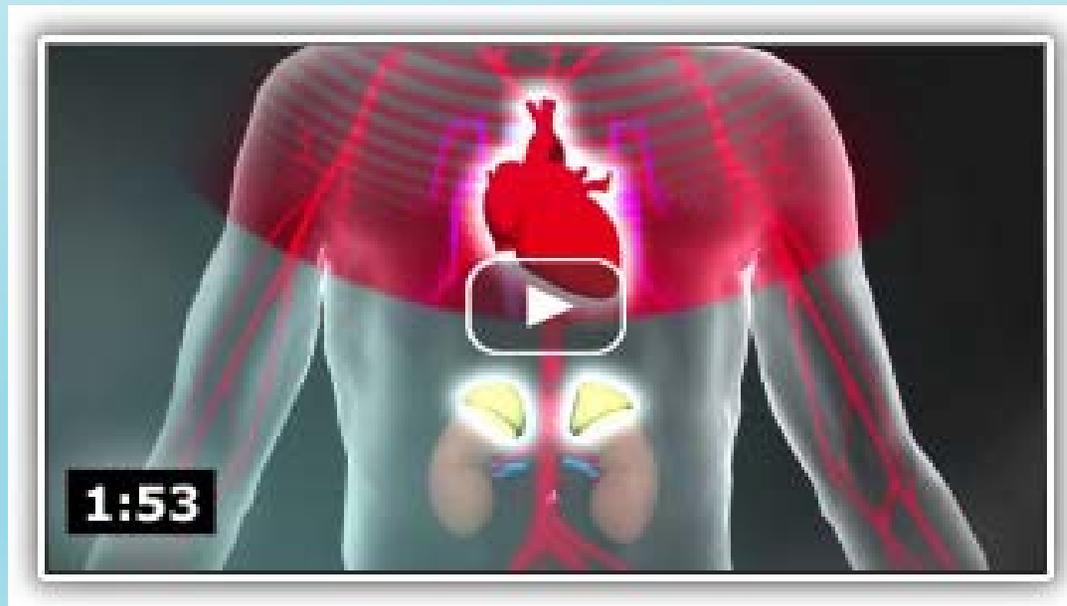


- Stress can be **harmful or toxic** if it overwhelms our ability to cope (elevated cortisol levels remain in the body)
- The **way we respond to stress is not fixed**; our response can be influenced by learning stress-management and coping strategies



# Center on the Developing Child at Harvard

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>



# Prolonged Toxic Stress

*Children who face repeated trauma and prolonged toxic stress may develop low self-esteem, believing that they don't matter, and that they have little effect on their environment, others or themselves. They may also become hyper-vigilant and suffer high anxiety because their brains are conditioned to constantly look for threats, thus resulting in low emotional regulation and impaired attention spans.*

- Jane Alison West, LPC, LSC, ECSE Heart of the West Counselling  
April 15, 2015

# Why Understand *Children* and Stress?

1. Capacity to cope with stress is built into brain circuits which are influenced by a range of experiences *beginning in early life*
2. Young children don't have many coping strategies - they can learn protective strategies that have life-long consequences
3. **Too much stress can:**
  - make it more difficult for children to focus, concentrate, learn and get along with others
  - have a profound effect on children's health
  - lead a child to demonstrate problem behaviours and interfere with normal functioning



# Stressors in Children

## Group Activity:

Group 1: Stressors – what are they?

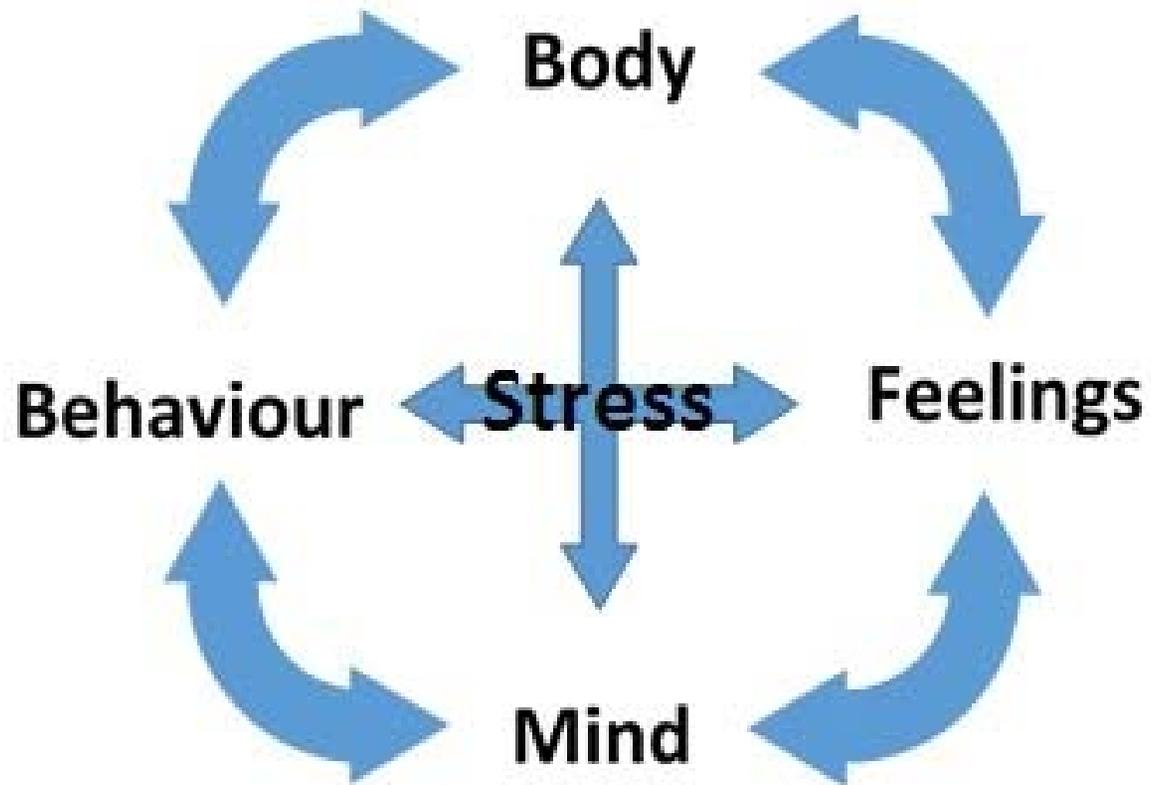
Group 2: Signs and symptoms of stress

Group 3: Strategies that kids use on their own

Group 4: Strategies that practitioners can use



# Body/Mind/Feelings/Behaviour Connection



“*Life* is like riding a bicycle.  
To keep your balance you must keep moving.”  
- Albert Einstein



## Application to the Early Learning Environment

- Some important skills that help people develop resiliency abilities can be learned, and introduced at an early age.
- A crucial part of enhancing resilience involves increasing our own and our children's awareness of the relationship between thinking and feeling.



**Understanding children's thinking styles and beliefs is a key part of helping children build resilience and deal with stress.**



## Nurturing the Young Child & Fostering Resiliency

The daily contact that adults have with young children places them in a unique position to influence the development of children's thinking styles and emerging belief systems and thereby their resilience.



# Understanding Child Development

- Childhood is a time of rapid growth in children's cognitive, physical, language, social and emotional development, and each child develops at their own pace in unique and different ways.
- There are many aspects of child development that influence how children handle stress (e.g. attachment, temperament, gender, age, environment, etc.)
- As young children develop, their early emotional experiences literally become embedded into the architecture of their brains.
- It is therefore critical to note that healthy emotional development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships with the important people in his or her life, both within and outside the family.

(National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) Working Paper #1)



*Every child requires someone in his or her life that is absolutely crazy about them.*

- Urie Bronfenbrenner

# When supporting children to manage stress and to develop resilience, it is important to practice the following tips:

- Apply positive guidance strategies
- Be flexible
- Follow the child's lead
- Offer options with lots of support
- Use variety and repetition



# Strategies for Reducing Stress

- ❑ Prevention Strategies
- ❑ Symptom Reduction
- ❑ Problem Solving
- ❑ Adaptation Response



Not all children will respond to the same strategies, so KHST! provides a variety of approaches through “Toolbox Activities”...

# Stress Stoplight

Familiar image that helps explain to young children the three stages of stress reduction:

**Red Light:** STOP – “Red Alert” – Recognize stress symptoms

**Yellow Light:** CHANGE – Deal with the stress and use tools in the toolbox

**Green Light:** GO – Feel the stress go away; Feel energized, more relaxed, in control and ready to go!



# Time to Explore ... Toolbox Activities

There are a variety of activities you can use to help children develop their coping skills.

Let's take a closer look ....

**Quick Ways to Relax**

**Kid Cuddle.**  
Standing or sitting, stretch arms out wide, wide, wide. Slowly bring arms forward, cross in front. Each hand holds onto the opposite shoulder. Squeeze, rock and cuddle the kid in your arms.



**Cloud Push** (to stretch out tight muscles).  
We are going to practice stretching up and pushing the clouds away. Stand tall. Place your hands on your hips. Bring one arm way up over your head and stretch it straight up. Try and reach a cloud and push it away. Push, push, push! Now let your arm fall slowly to your side. Bring the other arm up and push the cloud. Push, push, push! Now let your arm fall slowly to your side. Lift both arms up. Clasp hands together; turn the palms up and push and bounce the cloud. Slowly, slowly, let your arms float gently back to your sides.

**Who Knows?**  
Stand at attention, or sit up straight with hands along sides. Raise shoulders up to your ears. Hold. Let shoulders drop. While your shoulders go up, say, "Whoa." When you drop your shoulders, say, "Knows." Repeat five times.



**Deep Breathing** (to slow down the body and quiet the mind).  
Get into a comfortable position, either lying flat on your back on sitting comfortably with both feet flat on the floor and if you like, close your eyes. We are going to practice breathing slowly and deeply.  
Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy. Place one hand below your belly button. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose to a count of four. Feel the balloon fill up with air. When the balloon is full, breathe out slowly, using a count of four, to flatten the balloon. Your hand may rise and fall as the balloon fills and empties.  
1. Slowly blow up the balloon .... 1 ... 2 .... 3 .... 4 ....  
2. Now, slowly blow out and flatten the balloon .... 1 ... 2 .... 3 .... 4 ....  
3. Repeat five times and then breathe normally.



**Go Tight - Go Loose.**  
Stand at attention, hands along sides, fingers pointing down. Make a fist with each hand, squeeze each hand tight. Squeeze... Squeeze... Relax. Now, while you squeeze your fists again, tighten your arms to squeeze your body. Squeeze... Squeeze... Squeeze... Relax. Now, this time also squeeze your legs together while making a fist and squeezing your arms together. Squeeze... Squeeze... Squeeze. Relax. Repeat. Shake out your hands, arms and legs. Enjoy the sense of relaxation.

[www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org)  
Kidshave Stress Tool™ is a program of the Psychology Foundation of Canada



A KIDS HAVE STRESS TOOL™ TOOLBOX ACTIVITY

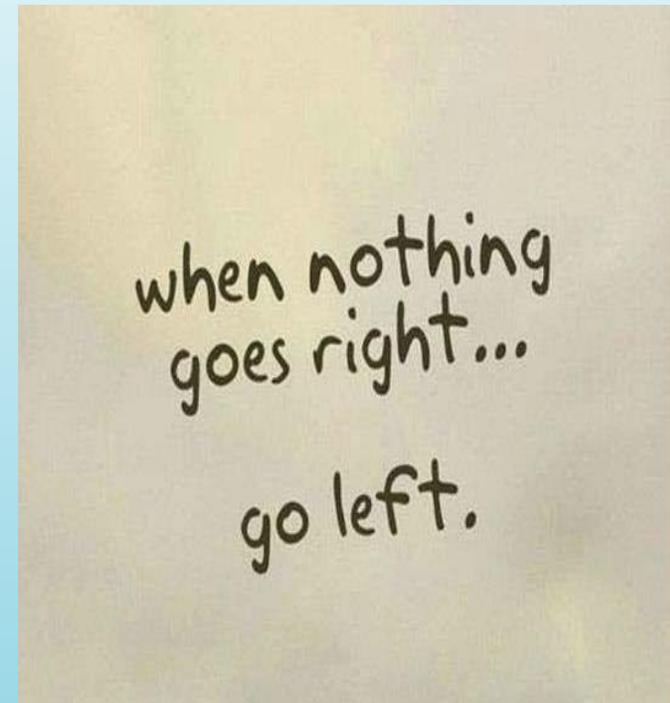
# Key Concepts of KHST!

1. Educators, parents and caregivers can help children learn ways to manage stress.
2. There are signs and symptoms of too much stress.
3. Children who can recognize, acknowledge and express their feelings appropriately, cope better with stress.
4. Relaxation strategies can reduce a child's reaction to stress.



## Key Concepts continued...

5. With help, children can learn to solve problems.
6. There are some simple ways to create a less stressful environment for children.
7. When children speak harshly or critically to themselves, they create more stress. Using their positive voice can lower stress.
8. Physical activity is a proven strategy for coping with stress and promoting self-regulation.





*The Atlantic*

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# THE OVER-PROTECTED KID

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BY HANNA ROSIN

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# *I'm a Hummingbird Parent\**

*I hover nearby, but not over my kids.*

*I remain distant enough to let them explore  
and learn to solve problems.*

*I teach them skills, mainly by example.*

*I zoom in only when their survival is threatened.*

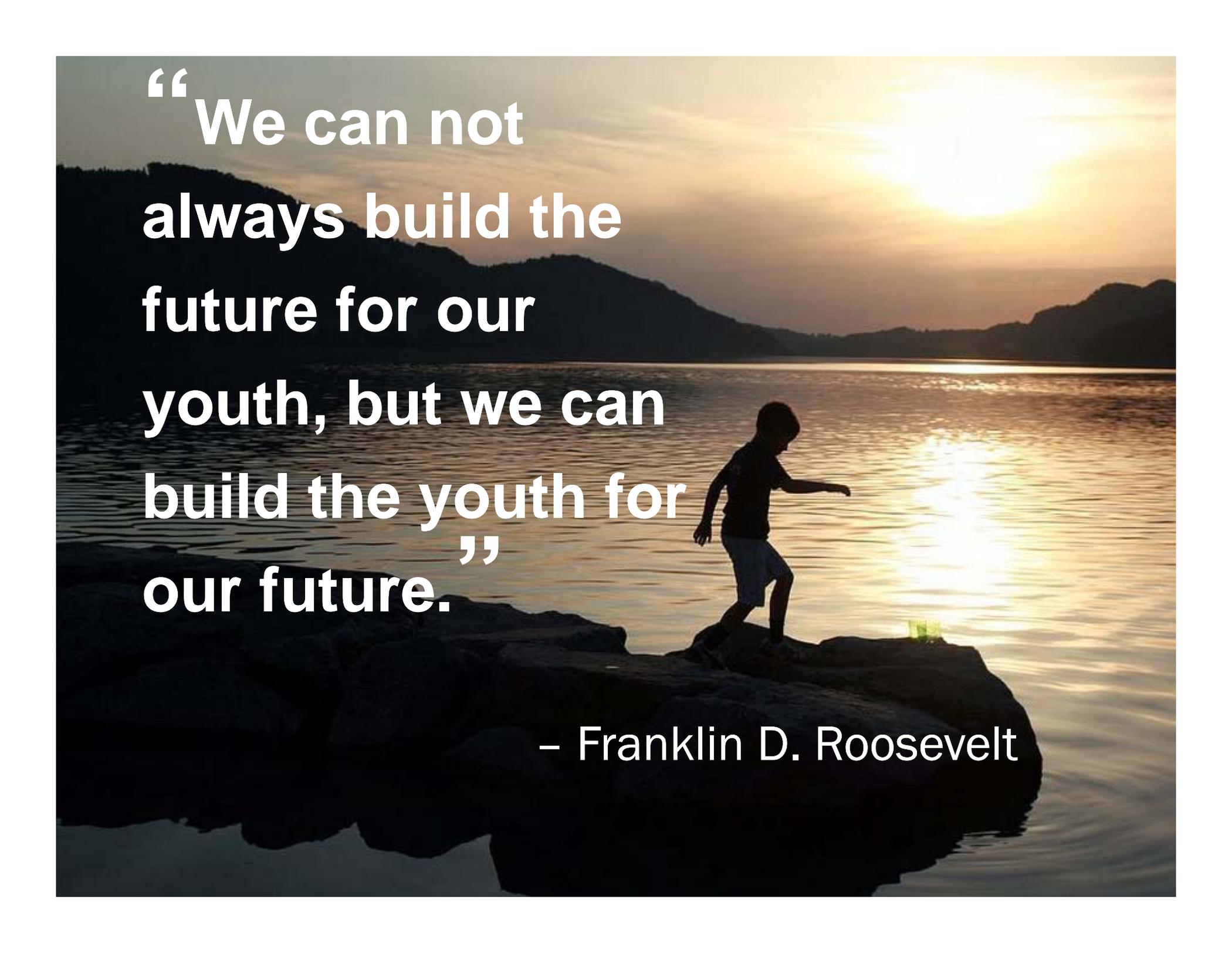
*My goal for them isn't a risk-free childhood,  
but a resilient life.*

Photo © Cheryl Charles

\* <http://blog.childrenandnature.org>



- Explore & identify sources driving your stress
- Learn various strategies and tips
- Read real life stories of how other Canadians
- have used these strategies
- Create a personalize stress management plan

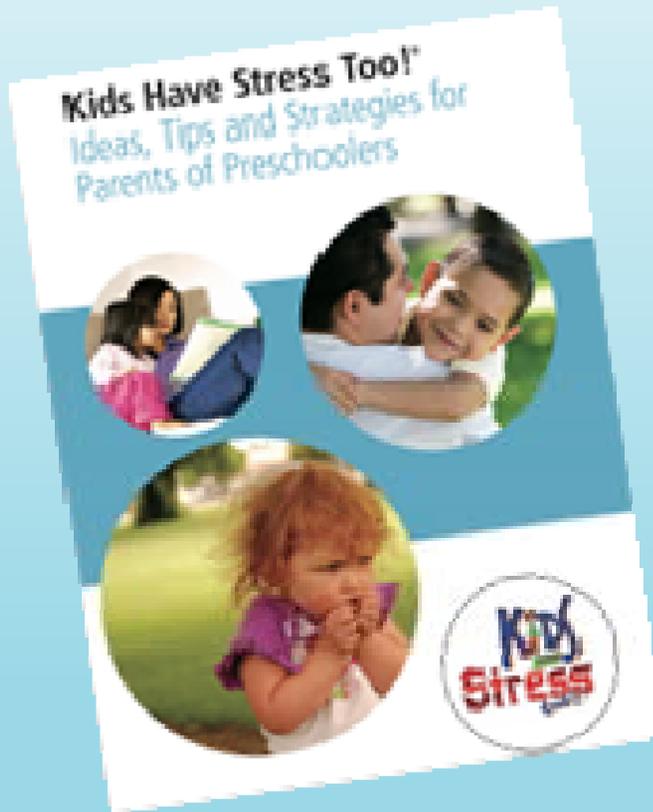
A silhouette of a person standing on a rock by a lake at sunset, with mountains in the background. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow over the water and sky. The person is looking out towards the water.

**“ We can not  
always build the  
future for our  
youth, but we can  
build the youth for  
our future.”**

**– Franklin D. Roosevelt**

For more helpful resources ....

[www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org)



THANK  
YOU

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## References

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- The Psychology Foundation of Canada *Kids Have Stress Too! Ideas, Tips and Strategies for Parents of Preschoolers*. Date unknown. Available at [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org)