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Many potential sources of stress have been identified in previous chapters. The most overriding factor contributing to stress can probably be put in one word: CHANGE.

Toffler in his bestseller *Future shock* (1970) refers to the rate of change as sometimes exceeding our capacity to deal with it. No previous century has changed in so many ways in so short a time. 'We are simultaneously experiencing a youth revolution, a sexual revolution, an economic revolution, a racial revolution, a colonial revolution and the most rapid and deep going technological revolution in history,' says Toffler. To this could be added the increasing pace of urbanisation and profound changes in values. Looming like a spectre on the horizon is Aids and the potential it holds for decimating the youth and young adult population.

In South Africa, there are additional factors disrupting the entire social fabric:

- enormous income discrepancies between the affluent and desperately poor
- the weakened family system, leading to a lack of discipline, inadequate role models for children and youth, and the emergence of a street corner culture
- rapid urbanisation and a shift from clan-based communities to a fragmented, urban culture with no clear community leadership
- an authoritarian 'macho-based' popular culture which tends to produce high levels of aggression. To this could be added an alarmingly high rate of violence and crime (Schlemmer, 1993).

**POINT TO PONDER**

As individuals, possibly the most important thing we can do is to promote a sound family life because so much of the negative behaviour we see is rooted in disrupted and unhappy families. If we can begin to stabilise and enrich our family life and reaffirm values of caring and responsibility, we will have contributed something of immense importance to the future.
At the time of writing, the South African context is hardly one calculated to promote a social climate of tranquility. Nonetheless, one should guard against pessimism and defeatist attitudes. It should be recognised that we are experiencing some very fundamental changes and are currently in a difficult but challenging transition which will, it is hoped, give rise to a truly unique and better society.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Some seventy years ago, Hans Selye introduced the concept of stress, which he explained as a discrepancy between an environmental demand and a person’s ability to meet it. Stress is a sense of unease and tension and a threat to one’s sense of wellbeing.

At a very basic human level, stress can be reacted to by fight or flight. The caveman facing a dangerous animal had only two choices: to fight and kill it, or to remove himself from the scene as fast as possible. To some extent we still have these two basic options. Aggressiveness in response to threat remains an all-too-human response, and sometimes a necessary one. So does flight, which may take the form of escapism by means such as fantasies of conquest or oblivion by means of alcohol or drugs.

Stress is associated mainly with negative and distressful events. A stress-scale was developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967), who examined the relationship between traumatic and difficult life events and stress levels. The most stressful life event was the death of a spouse. Next in order of severity was divorce, followed by marital separation. Fourth was the death of a close relative or a term in prison.

Apart from such situations of acute distress, there are those daily hassles which can wear us down: the daily traffic jam, time pressures, the
incessant barking of the neighbour’s dog, the inconsiderate behaviour of others, a sleepless baby, a dripping tap.

While variety has added spice to life, over-choice can become a problem in itself, for example when the supermarket offers ten different brands of toothpaste and when menu planning has to accommodate the taste of friends who include vegetarians, diabetics and those fighting high cholesterol.

It would be misleading, however, to think of stress only in negative terms. Selye, in an interview when he was aged 71, said: ‘... adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one – what I call EUSTRESS.’ Selye went on to explain that there are also different types of people: ‘... the “racehorses” who thrive on stress and are only happy with a vigorous, fast-paced lifestyle; and “turtles” who in order to be happy require peace, quiet and a generally tranquil environment’ (Psychology Today, 1978).

In other words, our personality is a powerful element in determining what we find stressful and how we react to it.

**Distress** is a response to a situation perceived as unpleasant and potentially harmful. It is associated with feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

**Eustress** is a response to a situation which is perceived as challenging, often associated with a sense of excitement. Risk-takers often fall into this response category, as do the ‘stirrers’ who find a calm life rather boring.

Either extreme of distress or eustress has its problems. Extreme distress may lead to the inability to take any constructive action. On the other hand, extreme eustress may also have negative consequences. It could result in recklessness, like that of the entrepreneur who started and lost seven big businesses, but was now having problems launching his eighth because he had lost the public’s confidence.

**What stress can do to us**

Stress can affect us in many different ways: psychologically and physically, and it is reflected in our behaviour. **Psychological** reactions
to stress may be anxiety, fear, aggression, hostility or social withdrawal. Our thinking may be affected in that we anticipate the negative, thereby sometimes provoking it, or by interpreting situations too negatively. One is reminded here of the difference between a pessimist and an optimist as humorously demonstrated with reference to the story of David and Goliath: The Israelites took a pessimistic view, thinking ‘He’s too big and strong for us to challenge’. David, however, saw the situation differently. He thought: ‘He’s so big, I cannot miss!’ His was the optimist’s response. In other words, stress can affect our perceptions, expectations and actions.

Stress may also trigger physical reactions of various kinds because body and mind are closely interconnected. When we are confronted by a threatening situation, such as a snake in our way as we walk along a mountain path, or when we fear dismissal from our job because of a mistake we have made, our mind says: DANGER. Paralleled by a mood of fear and anxiety, our body then responds with physiological ALARM signals, such as increased heart rate and raised adrenaline levels. Specific symptoms to which we may be prone may also be elicited. One person’s stomach will churn, another may feel his chest constrict (signalling a possible attack of asthma), yet another may break out in a rash. Stress finally culminates in ACTION. Some individuals react with aggression (attack is the best form of defence). Others may literally be paralysed by fear and unable to move or make any decision. Then there are those who may run from danger at a speed that they would not have thought possible in their wildest dreams, and yet others who cope constructively.

**STRESS IN ADULTHOOD**

The stresses adults face can be grouped into five main categories which often interact, forming a vicious circle:

- stress which is work related
- stress which is related to the family or other close relationships
- stress related to personal factors, such as our personality or to an identity crisis, low self-esteem or illness
- stress which is related to life’s developmental turning points
- stress which is largely determined by environmental factors, including political upheaval, war, violence, poverty and culture shock when change is too fast
- stress caused by natural disasters, such as floods or drought.
Stress in one area of life often spills over to other areas. When it occurs simultaneously in several areas then anxiety and distress can reach alarmingly high levels.

**Overdemand and stress**

Stress may be the result of overdemand when our resources are stretched to their limit.

Samuel is a case in point. He is a business executive, very much caught up in the rat-race. He gets up in the morning feeling tired from the night before when he entertained some important overseas clients. The food had been good, but too rich, the wine too abundant, the noise level too high. Perhaps he had also tried too hard to impress his clients. However, his wife was not particularly pleased with his late return home. He slept restlessly. The next morning, breakfast is a rather hurried affair, the emotional climate in the house rather chilly. Samuel feels guilty because he knows he is spending too little time with his family. He actually would prefer to devote more time to his two boys. They used to go fishing together. But nowadays he seems to need to catch up on work, still undone, and on sleep during weekends. So he is either in front of his computer, or resting on his bed. He leaves for work and is soon snarled up in the morning traffic jam and wishes he had left earlier. He turns on the radio for distraction but the
news is so awful it makes him feel worse. He gets to the office late, berates his secretary for not having completed a report he needs NOW, not later, throws himself into his specially designed desk chair and reaches for his cigarettes. He braces himself for his first meeting with a difficult client.

Emma is a social worker. She is a single parent, having divorced her alcoholic husband who phoned her at 2 o'clock in the morning to tell her he was coming back and nothing was going to stop him. Exhausted from this confrontation, Emma drags herself out of bed, wakes the children and makes breakfast. Knowing that this may be her only meal till the evening, she eats well, but probably too quickly. The children, as usual, are dawdling and trying her patience, but eventually they all pile into the old dilapidated car which takes a good deal of coaxing to start. She notices that her youngest has a nasty cough and she begins to wonder if he should not have stayed at home. The children start arguing and she tries to calm them, but ends up by shouting at them. This makes her feel guilty. Having dropped them at school, she is finally off to her demanding job. What awaits her is a desk cluttered with case reports and unfinished administrative work because, due to rationalisation, her staff has been cut. Some particularly difficult situations demand her immediate attention: a runaway teenager who refuses to go home because she hates her mother’s boyfriend living with them; a battered woman with nowhere to go. The telephone rings, there is another urgent case which has to be dealt with as soon as possible. Emma wonders if she will ever again feel in control of her life.

Samuel and Emma are in situations of over-demand, both headed for burnout, which simply means that the body’s resources are being depleted without being adequately replenished. It is a state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion.

**Stress and underdemand**

A stress situation of a totally different kind is that of underdemand, when a person’s talents and resources are seriously underutilised, when intellectual stimulation is often lacking and when there may be considerable social isolation.
George is a case in point. George worked as a diamond cutter. He had changed firms some two years previously, shortly before there was a slump in the diamond market. Staff were retrenched and as a relative newcomer to the firm, he was one of the first to go. He had in the meantime spent his pension money on a caravan, having visions of happy holidays with his wife and teenage daughter. After the initial shock, George settled down to a few repair jobs around the home, but these soon came to an end. Never having had many interests outside his work, he was sitting around idly, bored and also desperately lonely, realising for the first time how important the social contact with his colleagues at work had been. Now in his early forties, everyone seemed to think he was too old to start something new. In any case, he did not know what else there was for him to do. He tried a few sales jobs, but had to admit that this was not his forte. Moreover, the transport expenses he incurred were higher than his commission, so he gave this up. His self-confidence plummeted, he tried to assert himself by telling his wife how to run the home. She was now the breadwinner and thoroughly resented this. As George became more discouraged, he did less and less and began sitting in front of the TV for hours on end. His wife, on the other hand, was feeling more and more overburdened and began to nag him constantly about not trying hard enough to find a job and to sell the caravan, which he refused to do. He still hoped things would improve and, besides, the caravan was his only remaining status symbol.

What these life stories tell us is how stress in one sphere of life spills over into others. However, sometimes stress in one area is counteracted by satisfaction in other aspects of life. For example, the family can be a very important buffer against stress at work and, sometimes, work is an escape from a difficult family situation. Some individuals are able to contain anxiety within one domain and are able to leave their work worries behind when they leave the office, but many take them home. On the other hand, difficulties at home often affect work performance.

**LIFE’S TURNING POINTS AND STRESS**

The examples given above reflect stress situations peculiar to each of the individuals concerned. There are, however, ‘normal’ **turning points** in life which may be associated with stress. These are briefly outlined here,
but are dealt with as part of the developmental process discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9. The normal turning points most young adults face are finding work, developing an intimate relationship, establishing an independent household and starting a family. In the middle years, typical turning points are when children leave the family nest and retirement. All such events are part of everyday life and may be associated with a wide range of reactions from great joy to acute anxiety and, not infrequently, considerable stress.

Often stress motivates the search for solutions to problems. In this way many a crisis situation has actually been a spur to growth and development, as Sarah’s story reveals.

Sarah’s husband left her shortly after the birth of her second child. Sarah found herself alone, with two young children, and shattered self-confidence. Her artistic talent did not seem to provide much of an income. A kind and concerned uncle sent her for two years’ training in dressmaking and design while her mother offered to take care of the children during the day. ‘It was so tough that many a time I just wanted to give up. I’d come home to my children exhausted, trying to find some time for them, then preparing supper and making preparations for my course and the next day’s work. Life was just one long grind. If I hadn’t had my babies to think of, I would just have given up. I was also depressed but so busy that I didn’t have much time for self-pity. I completed the course and now the question was where to find enough work. Again my uncle came to my aid. He told me to start from home, to identify a gap in the market and to go for it. This was easier said than done, but I began to walk around shopping centres, talked to customers and salesladies, and gradually came to the conclusion that women who were either very petite or large, big-boned and tall rather than overweight found it difficult to find suitable clothes. This is what I began to focus on – and it worked! I’ll never be able to thank my uncle enough for his confidence in me. I also realise now that my marriage would never have worked out. My husband was a pleasant but totally irresponsible person. At 32 he is into his sixth job and third marriage.’
Divorce

Divorce has the second highest rating on the stress scale. Divorce has increased steadily in the second half of the twentieth century and South Africa is no exception, recording one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Thousands of children are affected by the breakdown of family life.

The reasons for divorce will vary from one couple to the next and often several factors interact, reinforcing one another. Major causes may be

- socio-cultural changes referred to in previous chapters
- uncertainties about the nature of the family and the roles of men and women
- early age at marriage: teenage marriages are high-risk marriages
- poor role models: children from divorced or unhappy homes are more likely to divorce than those from intact and happy homes
- lack of trust, love or sexual satisfaction
- change over time in one or both partners
- personal irreconcilable differences, for example in values
- personality problems
- infidelity, alcoholism, abuse

Divorce is the official, legal dissolution of a marriage, but it may not mean the end of a relationship. Many aspects which need to be worked through may only be resolved much later. Divorce is not only the legal termination of a marriage, it is a process which may extend over a long period of time. Several processes are involved which may overlap or occur in sequence.

- Emotional divorce: This happens when positive feelings diminish toward one’s partner and negative feelings increase. This process usually starts long before divorce is considered or finalised.
- Sexual divorce means that sexual attraction and sexual activity wane or stop.
- Financial divorce: This relates to the distribution of possessions and is often a source of great conflict. Frequently there is a major drop in living standards, especially in the case of the wife, after divorce.
- Divorce as a parental team occurs when each parent begins to function independently. Although a marriage relationship has ended, former partners still remain parents. One of the major post-divorce challenges is to ensure that this role continues in the best interests of the child.
- The breaking of bonds: This happens when bonds with friends, the in-
law family and the community are disrupted or even broken. It is a situation which may cause considerable anguish to the newly divorced. Friends not wishing to take sides or be drawn into the conflict may withdraw. It also has to be recognised that there are no prescribed social rituals or procedures which indicate what kind of help or support divorcees should be given. This is in sharp contrast to the loss of a spouse through death when communities and families rally around. The newly divorced may instead find themselves in a situation of considerable loneliness until new relationships have been established and it becomes clear which friends can still be counted on.

- Psychological divorce: This usually takes considerable time to achieve and relates to the development of a new identity.

These processes take time to work through and are often associated with considerable anxiety, hate, hurt, anger and ambivalence. Individuals contemplating divorce often have a clearer idea of what they are wanting to get out of than what they are getting into. There may be special difficulties for the woman who has been a full-time homemaker who mostly has to enter the labour market often at a rather low level because of interrupted training or lack of it. It is usually only among the fairly affluent that living standards are maintained by both parents after divorce, depending on the financial settlement.

**STRESS IN CHILDHOOD**

Children experience stress because they are afraid and do not understand what is happening around them, and because they fear being separated from those who are their source of love, security and protection. Children between the age of 6 months and 4 years are especially vulnerable. Situations associated with stress in childhood are as diverse as hospitalisation, the birth of a sibling, or divorce. The common denominator seems to be separation from a parent or caretaker, or greatly reduced time with them – at worst, removal from them. Among many black families, there is a history of dislocation, migrancy, poverty and family disruption. Not surprisingly, relationships between parents and children fluctuate and children are frequently moved from one household to another. 'Sporadic separation from parents and the pain of leaving one important person to live with another plays havoc with children’s emotions' (Kotze, 1991).
**Children, age and related stress**

Certain general conditions are associated with stress in children under the age of three.

- **1–3 months:** In these early months, pain and physical discomfort are the main sources of stress which result in irritability, and sleep and feeding disturbances. The newborn is still settling down to life outside the mother’s womb.

- **4–12 months:** During this stage unpredictable events which a child cannot yet understand are a frequent source of stress resulting in withdrawal or crying. For example, the mother who wears glasses for the first time, or the grandfather who wears a hat instead of his usual cap, may be surprised to find their child or grandchild turning uneasily away from them. To the child, they look too different to be the same.

- **13–24 months:** At this stage likely sources of stress are parental restriction which is necessary when the child explores the world but is still blissfully unaware of its dangers, like electric plugs, hot plates or deep water in a pool. Punishment and restriction cause stress and anxiety. Acute distress results from separation from the mother or from others to whom the child is deeply attached and peaks at about 15 months. It is somewhat less by 30 months. Distress is signalled by a tendency to cry, or to withdraw from play. These signs have been reported from cultures as diverse as the United States, African Bushmen in the Kalahari and Israeli Kibbutzim (Kagan, 1983).

- **The young child** feels most secure in an environment which it knows and which is patterned and is thus, to some extent, predictable. As a child’s understanding grows, it becomes less dependent on the presence of familiar people and situations which it knows.

- **The schoolgoing child** may feel stress because of pressure to perform and achieve (see chapter 8).

- **Adolescents** face many uncertainties as they leave childhood behind, but are not yet fully adult. Many of their uncertainties tend to be
exacerbated by contradictions in society, by a lack of guidelines and by new developments of various kinds (see chapter 9).

**POINT TO PONDER**

If parents are able to cope with stress fairly effectively, they are likely to be able to help their children cope with theirs, and to serve as role models showing children how to cope with difficult situations.

**Children and divorce**

'Although designed as a social remedy for an unhappy marriage, divorce has only gradually and reluctantly been acknowledged to be severely stressful for children and adolescents, as well as for many adults' (Wallerstein, 1983, p 268).

The effects of divorce will vary according to the circumstance preceding it. Separation from an uninterested, abusive or seductive parent will differ markedly from separation from a loved and trusted one. Also the age and gender of the child play a part in determining reactions to divorce.

Wallerstein (1980) conducted follow-up research on children of divorce for fifteen years and identified certain age-related reactions. In the case of young children (2–3 years) there is often bewilderment and anxiety which may be expressed in reverting to earlier habits. For example, a

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<td>'when will mummy/daddy come back?'</td>
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<td>finality of death is not grasped</td>
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<td>6–12</td>
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<td>'who will look after me?'</td>
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<td>sense of insecurity and abandonment</td>
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<td>Teenagers</td>
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<td>'who will guide me?'</td>
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three-year-old toilet trained child again wets its bed. A great deal of clinging behaviour is often shown. Children between three and five often show a marked loss of self-confidence and often blame themselves for the departure of one parent, usually the father, because they think the parent is leaving THEM, not the other parent. Loss of a father at this stage seems to have a particularly pronounced effect on sons. In the early school years, children seem to react in less observable ways, but are nonetheless upset, frightened and saddened. Often their schoolwork suffers. Nine- and 10-year-olds make efforts to understand the divorce, but this does not lessen their underlying sadness, anger and confusion. In the early teens, children generally have a better understanding of the divorce but this does not mean that they are emotionally less affected.

The greatest shock is experienced by children who have perceived their parents’ marriage as happy and are totally unprepared for the separation.

The loss of a parent due to death has a finality about it which most children come to acknowledge in time. Divorce does not have the same finality and many children of divorced parents often hope for a reconciliation for many years. Parents in what has come to be called the ‘acute phase’ of divorce may be suffering intense feelings of humiliation and rejection, and long-suppressed anger towards the partner may now be vented. Such feelings may diminish the effectiveness of the custodial parent, especially in the first years after divorce, and add confusion to the child’s already uncertain world. Custodial parents are likely to have less time for their children than before the divorce and non-custodial parents even less. The children’s sense of loss can be very real.

**POINT TO PONDER**

One of the most important factors in determining a child’s adjustment to divorce lies in the continuing contact with the non-custodial parent and the quality of the relationship between its divorced parents. If this is reasonably co-operative, children will come to terms with the situation more easily. In fact, children of divorced parents who can still co-operate well as parents often function better than children from severely conflicted, intact marriages.
Lois Gold (1992) suggests that separating couples should write their own *divorce vows*, such as:

- 'I vow to continue to provide for the children’s financial and emotional welfare.'
- 'I vow to place the children’s emotional needs above my personal feelings about my former spouse.'
- 'I vow to be fair and honest about the divorce settlement.'
- 'I vow to support the children’s relationship with their other parent and never do anything that might compromise that relationship.'
- 'I vow to deal with the issues in this divorce as constructively as I know how so that my family can heal and we can all go forward' (p 7).

The best interests of the child

To serve the best interests of the child, parents should bear the following in mind:

- Parents should not expect their children to have exactly the same feelings as they do. A parent may hate a former spouse; the children may still love this parent.
- Parents should make it clear, especially to younger children, that the fight is between them, the parents, not between parent and child.
- Parents should gradually prepare the children for divorce once a decision has been taken.
- Parents should guard against using their children as confidants or counsellors. Elkind says: ‘In this instance, children are hurried into mature interpersonal relations because the parent is under stress and needs a symbolic confidante’ (1981, p 42).
- Parents should identify and use sources of support, be they friends, members of the family, self-help groups or other community groups, church groups or professional counselling or mediation services. Parents should not see it as a sign of weakness or failure to seek help in order that they may function more effectively as individuals or as parents.

Grandparents

The support of grandparents can ease many of the tensions and stresses
resulting from divorce, provided the grandparents have not become embroiled in the conflict and take sides. Grandparents may provide the emotional support, time and love these children sorely need. They can be a source of continuity in an otherwise disrupted and often unfamiliar world. They can provide support in numerous practical ways and be a source of emotional calm and reassurance. In many ways they can thus assist the adjustment process of their grandchildren. Moreover, despite disappointment and worry grandparents may be freer to enjoy their grandchildren at a time when parents are preoccupied with themselves.

Little Shireen says: ‘I love my granny because she has time to talk to me and she bakes nice cakes.’

Tommy says: ‘My oupa is the best. He makes me laugh and plays soccer with me. He never gets mad at me.’

Sam, a teenager, says: ‘My grandparents are a haven of safety for me when I can’t stand the fights between my parents any more.’

A different situation may prevail in families where grandparents become substitute parents, which may be difficult for them unless they are willing, in good health and financially secure. Although the extended family in the black community may be able to provide more ‘people resources’, financially it may be a great burden to care for another child. As Mabusela (1994) says: ‘Extended families continue to carry the burden of relatives whose marriages and families break down, whatever the cause, without any possibility of accessing support from the country’s system of taxation.’

In the rural areas we find a disproportionate number of black grandmothers who are looking after grandchildren while their parents are employed or seeking employment in the towns.

**Single fathers**

Custody is generally given to the mother but not invariably so. The question arises if fathers can be effective single parents (refer back to chapter 6, the section on Mothering and Fathering). Certainly, there is a movement by fathers to assert their right to custody these days. Research by Risman (1986) has shown that with fathers who had wanted and fought for custody of their children, the relationship between father and child could be particularly close. However, this statement needs to be qualified. The *motivation* underlying the father’s fight for custody is important: was this determined by genuine love and concern for the child, or was it an act
of revenge against the mother? The most successful fathers were those who were non-confrontational, but acted out of true concern for their children.

Protective factors against stress in children

Some children are better able to cope with stress than others. A distinction has been made between children who are **vulnerable**, that is children who are easily distressed, and those who are **resilient** and tougher. Resilient children are often shielded by certain factors that protect them against stress. Chief among such factors are a certain kind of personality, a sound family life, and the support available in times of stress. These factors appear to be remarkably consistent across age and culture (refer to chapter 3). A considerable body of research indicates the importance of these factors (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983).

- **Personality**: Resilient children tend to have a cheerful disposition and a positive self-image. They tend to be friendly and co-operative, and low in defensiveness and aggression. They have confidence in their ability to deal with a stressful situation rather than a sense of helplessness. They are thoughtful rather than impulsive.

- **Family life**: In the families of resilient children there is generally love, emotional warmth and considerable closeness. At least one person in the family has a special interest in the child and encourages its activities. This is often the mother, as families were not necessarily intact because fathers might be absent. The family also offered some protection against insecurity and threat. There are clear guidelines or rules in the home and the roles and place of adults and children are understood. There is little uncertainty about who does what in the home. Parents try
to deal with difficult situations constructively, thus being helpful role models.

- **Support:** In the midst of numerous difficulties, resilient children could count on support from a variety of sources such as peers, older members of the family, teachers, relatives or members of their religious community. These people were also often role models who provided examples of how to cope with stress.

Those children who are vulnerable and lack such protective influences may be inclined to develop psychiatric conditions or act out their anger and frustration through aggression and violence.

From those who are able to cope we learn what conditions are required to help those who cope less well. There are important cues for parents here.

### POINT TO PONDER

The big question is: How do I as a parent cope with a child who is vulnerable in some particular way?

The answer is that all the conditions of effective parenting apply to the vulnerable child—only more so!

- Good communication; love and acceptance; clear guidelines; fair and consistent control; LOTS of encouragement and support.
- Parents should nevertheless guard against over-protectiveness because this could stand in the way of the child developing coping skills which would help it to learn how best to deal with its difficulties.
- Parents should not be afraid to admit that they might need support or professional help when dealing with a difficult or vulnerable child. This should not be seen as an admission of failure but simply as good common sense.
- Among those who are difficult or vulnerable there may be highly talented and gifted children. Many a creative genius would have fitted the descriptions of vulnerability very well. Here one can think of Winston Churchill, Ludwig von Beethoven and Albert Einstein.
ADULTS COPING WITH STRESS

It should be recognised that if we wish to help our children deal with stress, then we as parents need to be able to cope with our own trials and tribulations. Many of the factors relating to coping with stress in children are not unlike those relevant to adults. Just as with children, so there are certain factors in adulthood which may be seen as protective factors against stress. They enable one to cope with the stresses of life reasonably well, and sometimes astonishingly well.

Hardiness: In recent years the concept of 'hardiness' has come to the fore. It was coined by Kobasa (1982) to describe the features of people who dealt constructively with stress. Her study related to heavily stressed executives, lawyers and US Army captains. A distinction emerged between those who were prone to illness, notably coronary heart disease, and those who remained healthy - the 'hardy' ones. Three characteristics of hardiness emerged.

- Hardy individuals had a strong sense of commitment, that is they strongly believed in what they were doing. We see such commitment in Nelson Mandela, and many others, who endured lengthy prison sentences and hardship, yet emerged with strong personalities intact. One reason for this is surely to be found in their sense of commitment to their struggle for freedom.

- Secondly, hardy people tend to see a challenge in a situation where others would see only threat or disaster. A remarkable example of this kind of attitude and perception is to be found in the famous inventor Thomas Edison. While trying to perfect the sound of a new invention, the gramophone, he became increasingly deaf. He said: 'Deafness pure and simple, was responsible for the experimentation which perfected the machine. It took me 20 years to make a perfect record of piano music, because it is full of overtones. I now can do it - just because I am deaf' (in Clarke, 1977, p 3). In other words, his deafness spurred him on to extra effort to produce a loud and clear sound.

- Kobasa found that hardy people tended to have a sense of being in control, that is being able to influence the course of events. This is in sharp contrast to the sense of powerlessness and helplessness which is allied to anxiety, stress and depression.

The availability of suitable support was also found to be important.
POINT TO PONDER

One may not be able to change a situation but one can change one's attitude. Strangely, then the situation also seems to change.

How do I identify stress in myself?

In order to deal with one's stress, it is necessary to recognise and to monitor it. Zimbler and colleagues (1985) suggest the following self-monitoring skills:

- **Listen to your body.** It will tell you when you have had enough through signals such as insomnia, headaches, stiff neck, tiredness and other stress-related symptoms.

- **Listen to your feelings.** When there are few moments of joy and peace and if you suffer great mood swings, your tension level could be too high.

- **Listen to your spirit.** Does life seem to lack purpose or meaning? Are you given to apathy and cynicism? This could tell you that stress is getting you down.

- **Listen to your relationships.** Are you irritable and impatient with others? This, too, signals stress.

I would add the following:

- **Listen to your attitudes.** Are you particularly negative, see no light at the end of the tunnel?

- **Look at your behaviour.** Is this in line with what you value and believe? Are you being true to yourself?

EXERCISE

At this point you may wish to get some indication of your stress level. Complete the following checklist by marking the correct answer in every
row as it applies to you. For example, if your answer to question 1 is ‘often’ score 2, and so on.

### Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress score</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I feel tense, anxious and worried</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 People at work make me feel tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I eat/drink when tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 People at home make me feel tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I smoke when tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I have tension or migraine headaches, indigestion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I can’t forget my worries at night or on weekends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I find it difficult to concentrate when I worry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I take tranquillisers or other drugs to relax or sleep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I have no time to relax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I can’t relax even when I have the time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 My workday is made up of many demands and deadlines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 I find it difficult to make decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 I worry about the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 My life is full of uncertainties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL**

Add up your score: if it is below 11 your stress is low – you might even be a bit apathetic. Between 11 and 22 suggests that your stress is manageable. If it is between 23 and 33 then you should try to reduce your stress. If it is above 34 your stress really is too high and you need to seriously work at reducing it.
How some people deal with stress

In numerous workshops concerning a variety of topics ranging from women's roles to retirement, I have asked participants what they did when feeling tense or stressed. In other words, what were their personal anti-stressors that helped them cope and feel better. The sheer variety of responses is fascinating. They can roughly be fitted under the following headings:

- **Physical reactions:** Go for a walk, jog, clean the cupboards, head for the veld, soak in the bath, pace up and down, dig in the garden, wash the car, go to the zoo, go to the fridge, have a drink.

- **Emotional reactions:** I cry, then feel better; I go quiet and withdraw until I feel calmer; play soothing music; blow a fuse and get it off my chest; if things keep on going wrong it eventually becomes ridiculous – I laugh.

- **Thinking:** I think of all the things I want to say to the person who has made me mad – fortunately I don’t say them; I think about what to say and do; I think of different options or get more information; I get off the fence and make a decision; I try to take my mind off it – think about something else; I read a book or watch TV.

- **Interpersonal:** Talk it over with someone; become excessively controlled or polite; go where I am alone; talk to my dog.

- **Faith:** I take it to the Lord; I pray – this calms me especially when I see no way out of a situation; I look for an answer in the scriptures; I speak to my minister or religious counsellor.

**EXERCISE**

How do you cope with stress?

**GETTING RID OF STRESS**

Many different methods have been tried and advocated to help reduce stress. These are some of them.
Gain a sense of perspective

Ask yourself: Is this really important? You may be reacting to a minor issue as if it were vitally important. A useful test for gaining perspective is asking yourself: Will this matter still be important one day from now; one year from now; twenty years on? Does this traffic jam, your son's long hair, the slow service in a restaurant, a baby's tantrum, merit a full-blown stress reaction?

Sort out your priorities

Frequently, we are torn apart by several seemingly equally important tasks. If this is the case, first make sure about the difference between what is urgent and important. If work and family involvements clash you might set aside one evening a week when family comes first and no other matters are allowed to intrude.

Set long- and short-term goals

If you see only the long-term goal such as completing a course, it may seem too daunting in view of your other commitments. Instead, plan to spread it over a longer period of time and consider what other interests or involvements you could reduce. Set yourself a manageable goal for each month and each year.

Mental rehearsal

Relax and then quietly visualise a situation you dread or are worried about. Work out as complete a picture of this situation as possible: the surroundings, the people, the points you wish to make or what you want to do. In other words, you rehearse the situation. Imagining a positive outcome can be reassuring.

Sometimes it helps to imagine the worst possible scenario. For example, in an important job interview you see yourself tripping over a carpet and entering on your hands and knees. Flustered, you can't
remember the name of the person who is interviewing you; you confuse the secretary with the boss and act accordingly; you've left your revised CV at home; you forget to ask what salary is being offered; you spill the coffee all over the desk - let your imagination run riot! Sooner or later your sense of humour will take over. The actual interview may be a simple matter by comparison.

However, it should be remembered that some tension may help to raise an individual's performance to a peak. The great actor Sir Lawrence Olivier said that he, like most other performers, was very tense before every performance, right up to his last one.

**Physical exercise**

High stress and low fitness is a bad combination. It is by now well established that exercise has beneficial physical and psychological effects. De Vries (1983) found that exercise was more effective in reducing anxiety than one of the most frequently prescribed tranquilisers. A 15-minute walk brought about this effect which lasted for at least an hour. Exercise, suited to the needs of a particular person, and the features of hardiness that is commitment, challenge and control, in combination form a powerful defence against disease and promote psychological wellbeing.

These days much emphasis is placed on aerobic exercise which increases the intake of oxygen. Activities which require sustained and consistent effort promote such aerobic effects better than those demanding sudden spurts of intense energy. Among activities recommended are: jogging, swimming, cycling, walking (not ambling) and other aerobic exercises. Ideally, each person should have an exercise programme worked out for them taking into account their age and health. It is unwise to suddenly embark on a vigorous exercise programme if one has been particularly inactive or unwell, is over the age of 35. Exercise should be increased gradually – its aim should be to reduce, not increase, stress. For this reason, competition is also best avoided. Exercise should be enjoyed.

Moses and others (1989) found that fitness increased in a high-intensity as well as in a moderate aerobic exercise group. However, psychological wellbeing – that is reduced anxiety and tension – was found only in the moderate group. This was not the case in the high-intensity group, suggesting they found this programme too demanding, which is not surprising since they were non-exercisers before entering the programme.
It is possible to increase one's physical activity by making simple adaptations in regard to everyday habits, for example by climbing stairs instead of using lifts, by regularly doing stretching and limbering up exercises, by walking briskly for 20 minutes several times a week. A particularly desk-bound person could place the telephone at a distance, thus being compelled to get up to answer it and in doing so, could do some deep breathing and stretching as well. Mothers of young children, however, may need rest rather than exercise.

Relaxation

'The purpose of relaxation is to give the body a rest and refresh the mind allowing the restorative processes of the body to take over' (Zimbler et al 1985, p 175).

The last part of the sentence should be especially noted because it implies that the body has its own natural powers to heal and restore itself.

One of the quickest ways to control stress and anxiety is by regulating one's breathing. When anxious, breathe in deeply, expanding your chest fully, and then slowly exhale. If you are rushing somewhere taking quick, short steps, change to fewer, longer, slower steps.

There are many techniques of relaxation that go beyond the scope of this book. Find one that makes you comfortable and fits in with your daily routine. It is regularity, rather than the length of time that you spend on it, that is important.

Time out

Taking time out means removing oneself either physically or psychologically from a stressful situation in order to be restored and refreshed. For many this may mean getting away from the hustle and bustle of city life and retreating to the sea, walking in the veld, climbing a mountain - just getting closer to nature. For others it may mean watching a hilarious
comedy on TV. Others might prefer a good read. By distancing oneself from a problem one often gains new insight into it, or can return to face it in a less emotional state of mind. Many people have a daily quiet time given to contemplation, communion with God, and prayer.

Creative activities are known to be particularly restorative, like arranging flowers, playing an instrument, painting a picture or making pottery.

**Humour and laughter**

The role of laughter in restoring physical health has been told by Norman Cousins, author of several books, who as editor of scientific and medical journals acquired a remarkable knowledge of medical science and pharmacology. He was suddenly stricken with a disease diagnosed as a serious collagen disease — a disease of the body's connective tissue which binds the cells together. In his autobiographical description of the disease, *Anatomy of an illness*, he writes: 'I was coming unstuck. I had considerable difficulty in moving my limbs and turning over in bed ... At the low point of my illness, my jaws were almost locked.' His chances of recovery were rated as 1 in 500.

On the basis of his medical knowledge and with the full cooperation of his doctor, he embarked on a very unorthodox treatment programme of his own, stopping all medication and pain-killing drugs. His treatment consisted of large doses of vitamin C, which he could justify for this particular condition. However, what is of interest here is that the second component of his treatment was laughter — again based on sound scientific reasoning. So, he started his laughter cure by looking at funny television films, such as 'Candid Camera' and other comedies. He was read to from humorous books and visitors were expected to bring him jokes and funny anecdotes. 'It worked. I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep.' To establish if there was really a scientific basis for his idea, sedimentation rate readings were taken before and several hours after laughter episodes. The sedimentation rate dropped by at least five points after each laughter episode. What is more, this improvement was maintained and was cumulative. The physiological basis was established for the notion that laughter is, indeed, the best medicine! More recently it has come to be recognised that hearty laughter has an aerobic effect.
Controlling anger
When stressed, we are much more likely to have temper tantrums and angry outbursts. We know when we are angry because our feelings tell us so: 'I'm furious!' 'I resent my boss's attitude - I feel like punching him on the nose!' 'My wife makes me mad!' The body signals your feelings. Your teeth may be clenched, your body generally tense, your head aching. Even if anger seems entirely justified, the question still arises how to deal with it constructively without suppressing the anger or exploding and possibly making matters even worse. It can be helpful to do the following:

- Count slowly from 1 to 10.
- Take a few deep, slow breaths.
- Rehearse the situation in your mind and consider different ways of dealing with it.
- Think about the advantages of keeping cool.
- Be assertive, not aggressive.

Both highly aggressive people, who act out their aggression, and timid non-reactors, who don’t dare to express themselves, could benefit from learning to be assertive. Assertiveness does not mean conflict avoidance, but enables one to deal with it in a way that does not lead to increased aggression and conflict, but tends to reduce it.

Assertiveness
Being assertive means that you affirm your right to your personal views
and opinions and goals. The following provide some cues about how to be assertive:

- State your needs, opinions, goals calmly, firmly and with conviction, not with apology or aggression.
- Avoid the ‘little girl’ or ‘little boy’ pleading voice.
- Be genuine and don’t pretend to feel or think what is not true.
- Hold your body erect and avoid distracting actions like hair-pulling or fiddling with a tie.
- Rehearse what it is you want to say.
- Choose a good time to state your case.
- Do not be sidetracked. If necessary, repeat what you have to say.
- Assume a co-operative response from the person to be confronted. This will make you less defensive or aggressive.
- Guard against being on the defensive.
- Make ‘I-statements’. ‘I think,’ ‘I believe’, rather than ‘You did’, which may be seen as attack and be responded to by counter-attack.
- Be specific and avoid general statements or requests.
- Be aware of the other person’s reactions and modify your approach if necessary but do not revert to aggression or timidity.
- Say ‘no!’ firmly and with conviction, and without feeling guilty.

Check back to chapter 5 on Communication to remember to look, observe, listen and stick to the point.

**EXERCISE**

1. You wish to end a situation that makes you angry but you don’t know how. Write down or talk about how you have tried to do this in the past. How could you approach the issue more assertively?
2. You would like your children to be more co-operative in the home. How could an assertive approach be helpful? Think of a specific situation.

**Focus on strengths, not weaknesses**

It is important to recognise one’s strengths. This does not mean being
conceited or arrogant, or denying one's weaknesses. Solutions to problems are found via our strengths, not our limitations. An individual's strengths may relate to little actions as well as to bold ones. They could include being a loyal friend, being kind to animals, perseverance, being an encourager or a peacemaker, being well organised, honest and reliable, doing one's job well and being punctual. One may also have special talents such as singing, being a good golfer, making clothes, fixing things, beautifying a home or garden or managing well on a small income. A special strength is having the courage to confront one's weaknesses and to do something to overcome them. This list is anything by exhaustive.

EXERCISE

Ask yourself:

1. What do I do better than others?
2. What have I done that was really difficult for me to do?
3. What have I done that I can feel proud of?
4. What have I learned to do in the last two years that I couldn't do before?
5. What are the strengths your answers have revealed?

Such questions and answers could also be used to help a child gain confidence in its ability to cope with its own difficulties.

Remember that little actions can mean a lot. Often the first small step in overcoming a problem is the hardest.

SUMMING UP

Parents who cope constructively with stress can best help their children to cope with theirs.

There are many different ways to counter stress. It is particularly important to mobilise one's own resources, to cultivate and use one's strengths, and to replenish a depleted body and mind. Having read this chapter, consider how often, and to what extent, you are actually helping to restore and revitalise your body, your mind and your spirit.
Group interaction

The following suggestions may be useful when this book, or sections of it, form the basis of group discussion and interaction.

The aim of group interaction is to learn and to share insights and experiences to help shed light on difficult matters concerning parenting and human development. The ultimate question is:

SO WHAT?

So what has been learnt and what constructive action can be taken? Without such follow-through the value of any discussion will be very limited.

As participant in a group you learn about yourself and others. To do this you need to share and listen. Learning takes place at different levels. Intellectually, you may learn about notions very different from your own, you may gain a new sense of perspective, or feel affirmed in what you believe. Emotionally, you may learn to understand your own feelings and those of others better. You may learn about different ways of dealing with difficulties, and you may gain moral support for what you believe. Every participant in a group should pledge absolute confidentiality.

Although maximum participation is to be encouraged, every group member has the right to ‘pass’, if feeling unable, hesitant or unwilling to answer a question put to them.

Several factors influence the way discussion is structured and conducted. The size of the group influences the extent of personal participation. In a large group, say over 25, there are two options. The first is to encourage individuals to participate from the floor by asking questions, by making suggestions or comments in regard to the topic being considered. These comments could be listed on a flip chart or board. The facilitator or group leader could arrange them according to themes which could then be discussed more fully. A second alternative is to first have a general session when some information is fed into the group. After this the group breaks into smaller groups of not more than seven people who then discuss issues raised. Each group selects someone from its own group to feed back ideas generated to the group as a whole.

The time available will affect the approach adopted. For example, if a meeting is only one hour and aims to discuss only one particular topic, say child care of the preschool child, there may not be time to break into groups.
But if the intention is to work through a range of topics of interest to parents of teenagers over a period of time, it would be preferable to be in small groups, to develop a certain sense of cohesion and mutual support. Then it would be preferable to allow enough time for closer group interaction.

Some sensitive topics could be shared in small groups of two or three participants, or only between husband and wife.

It is possible to combine these different approaches and to introduce others, such as role play.

The group leader or facilitator could be a person with considerable experience in leading groups. However, many people without specialised training can be effective facilitators because they are good listeners and are able to encourage participation by others and to sum up what has been learnt.

If discussion is of a very informal kind in a family or among friends, it could be helpful to first read chapter 5 on communication and apply the guidelines given there.
GENERAL SOURCES

The following books may be consulted if more detailed, scientific information is required. They cover human development in more depth. They are written for psychology students but discussion leaders or those directly involved with adult education or services to parents and children will find these textbooks useful. Preference is given to South African publications. These books are generally to be found in book stores specialising in educational or academic books or may be ordered directly from the publishers.

SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLICATIONS

Gerdes, L C, Moore, C M, Osche, R, Van Ede, D 1988. The developing adult (2nd ed). Durban: Butterworths (now obtainable from Heinemann, Isando, Gauteng). This book deals only with adult stages of development. It provides a broad perspective concerning development within the context of work, the family and social environment. (Also obtainable in Afrikaans: Die ontwikkelende volwassene.)


CHAPTER REFERENCES AND NOTES

Chapter 1 Parents then and now


Chapter 2 Can the family survive?

Chapter 3 Parent–child scenarios

Chapter 4 The pillars of parenting: knowledge, love, discipline
Fromm, E 1957. *The art of loving*. London: Unwin. (One should not be misled by the title of this book. It is not about skills and techniques but about developing the capacity to love others).
Lewis, C S 1971. *The four loves* (first published in 1960). Glasgow: Collins. The four loves which are examined are affection, eros, friendship, and charity.


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**Chapter 5 Communication**


Several of the titles referred to may be regarded as old. However, they are classics of their kind and retain a remarkable relevance to this day.

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**Further reading**


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**Chapter 6 Parents as people and team mates**


on maturity; chapter 6 on the psychology of men and women; chapter 8 on marriage and the family.


**Chapter 7 Milestones and stages**

Erikson, E 1963. *Childhood and society*. New York: W W Norton. A seminal work which to this day forms the theoretical base for the study of psychosocial development.


Fynn (no initials) 1977. *Mister God this is Anna*. London: Fontana/Collins. The story of a precocious, gifted little foundling in London’s East End who reveals an understanding of ‘Mister God’ and the universe that is startling in its insight, although expressed in the words of a child.


Levinson, D J 1978. *The seasons of a man’s life.* New York: Knopf. (It is interesting to note that Gould and Levinson independently came to similar conclusions that there are patterns and sequences of adult development, though they differ in emphasis and approach.)


Further reading

Sheehy, G 1997. *New passages: mapping your life across time.* London: Harper Collins. A theme running through this book is that it is now taking longer to grow up but also to grow old. Of particular interest to the forty-something generation.

For a more detailed, scientific explanation of all aspects of development the following South African textbooks could be consulted:


Practical books

There are considerably more practical books for the general reader on early parenthood and on the early years of childhood than on later stages of development. The following South African publications are helpful:

Chalmers, B 1984. *Early parenthood. Heaven or hell.* Cape Town: Juta. This book is mainly about mothers and their reactions to becoming a parent. It deals with pregnancy, confinement and the first year of a baby’s life.


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**Magazines**

There are several magazines about child care which can be helpful to parents, especially of young children, such as *Your Baby* and *Living and Loving.*

**Chapter 8 Parents and the primary school child**


De Wet, T 1995. Principal’s address to the parents and staff of Irene Primary School. Quoted with permission.


Further reading

For more detailed, scientific information concerning the primary school child and the development of adults consult:


Practical books

Keech, R 1993. Better marriages, better life. Halfway House: Southern. A practical guide for those who wish to enrich their marriage, or to consider whether a relationship should continue. The emphasis falls on the mutual satisfaction of needs and provides useful guidelines about communication and family meetings.


Chapter 9 Midlifers and teenagers


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**Further reading**

For more detailed scientific reading the following textbooks could be consulted.


**Practical book**


**Sources of help and information**

- **Concerning life skills and family relationships** contact FAMSA (Marriage and Family Life Society of South Africa). FAMSA has presented 'Education for Living' programmes for many years. The programmes have been developed by social workers with specific expertise in family relationships. Sex education is part of a broadly based programme that places it in the context of self-knowledge, human needs, interpersonal relations, values and a sexual code of conduct. It has been presented in many schools. For information contact your local FAMSA Society or the National Council PO Box 2800, Kempton Park, 1620.

- **Concerning drugs and alcohol abuse**, contact SANCA (South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence) PO Box 10134, Johannesburg, 2000.
**Tough Love** is a support group for family and friends of drug dependants. National office, Ferndale Community Centre, Cnr Surrey and Harley Avenus, 2194.

- **MIMS Services Directory of Health and Welfare Facilities in South Africa.** PO Box 2059, Pretoria, 0001. This is a national register of helping services.
- **University Departments of Psychology, Social Work or Education** could be contacted in regard to professional services, seminars and workshops.
- **Churches and religious groups** may offer counselling services to families in distress or those who wish to enrich family relationships within the framework of their own religious belief system.

**Chapter 10 Families, stress and coping**


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**Further reading**


**Practical books**


**Sources of help**

FAMSA (Family and Marriage Society of SA). Among others provides marriage enrichment courses, counselling for single parents, preparation for marriage, stepparenthood and divorce, and many other family problems. Contact your local FAMSA society or the National Council Office: PO Box 2800, Kempton Park, 1260.
SAAM (South African Association of Mediators). Their focus is mediating between divorcing couples to ensure that the best interests of children are served. The national office can be contacted at (011) 433-0908
EFFECTIVE PARENTING demands knowledge, understanding and skill. Being a family is an ongoing human relations and development exercise for both parent and child. Certain skills are valuable tools for this: good communication, thoughtful decision-making and coping constructively with conflict or stress. But most of all, parenthood is a matter of the heart: of love, concern, kindness, compassion, and patience stretched to its limits. It is a lifelong involvement, and of crucial importance in the child's formative years.

BRINGING UP PARENTS AND CHILDREN addresses these issues. The author, Prof Lily Gerdes, is well known for her work in the field of developmental psychology. This book is meant for the well-intentioned and thinking parent, and others interested in and involved with the development of children and themselves.