

T U R N
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T H E
N O I S E



a practical guide to building
an emotionally healthy family in
a chronically overstimulated world

S A R A H
B O Y D

M.ED. PSYCH.

Parenting today can be deeply challenging, but *Turn Down the Noise* provides wise guidance and strategies to navigate a world that is often too loud and too much for our kids. This is a fantastic resource for parents, caregivers, and anyone else who is invested in compassionately shaping the next generation.

AUNDI KOLBER, MA, LPC

Therapist and author of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

As a licensed counselor who has worked with children and families for years, I can confidently say that *Turn Down the Noise* is a game changer for parents navigating our overstimulating world. The book's strength lies in its comprehensive approach, addressing the impact of technology, the importance of rest, and the need for play. *Turn Down the Noise* is a resource for parents seeking to create a balanced, emotionally healthy family life in the face of modern pressures. It's a compassionate guide that will resonate with many parents and caregivers.

AMY WINE, MA, LPC-S, LMFT-S

Counselor, marriage therapist, and performance coach

What does it look like to “be still and know that [he is] God” in the midst of today’s overstimulating world? In *Turn Down the Noise*, Sarah Boyd blends deeply relatable stories with evidence-based research, offering not just a diagnosis of the noise around us but hope and clear steps for being still, allowing us to cultivate spiritual, emotional, and mental resilience in our families. With compassion and insight, she equips parents to create an environment in which they and their children can embrace the slow, gentle path of flourishing. It is a must-read for anyone seeking to slow down and create meaningful connections with their family.

AMANDA ERICKSON

Coauthor of *The Flourishing Family: A Jesus-Centered Guide to Parenting with Peace and Purpose*

Raising kids? You need this thoughtful, practical book. Sarah’s deeply researched work and caring words of wisdom will help you feel seen,

validated, and supported in all the stages of the parenting journey. As someone in the thick of parenting, I highlighted my way through—and I'll be sharing copies with friends too.

KAYLA CRAIG

Author of *Every Season Sacred* and *To Light Their Way*; creator of Liturgies for Parents

Turn Down the Noise spoke to my heart as a woman and a mother like no other book has. Sarah's ability to recognize the overstimulation in today's world and illuminate a hopeful path forward is balm to the soul and offers practical guidance for the daily tasks of parenting. Beautifully written, full of encouragement, and incredibly insightful, this is a book you will reread many times and want to share with every parent you know.

ROBIN LONG

Founder of Lindywell and author of *Well to the Core*

Sarah Boyd is a leading voice in the conversation around the chronic stress and overstimulation plaguing today's families. As we work to empower the next generation, *Turn Down the Noise* is an integral resource for equipping parents and children with what they need to slow down, embody new rhythms, and advocate for what they need to truly thrive.

KATHRYN GORDON

CEO of the Jon Gordon Companies; wife; mother; and bestselling author of *Relationship GRIT*

Sarah Boyd is one of the sanest women I know. And I trust her. Which is why I'm so grateful for this book. In *Turn Down the Noise*, Sarah gathers her training in psychology to help us think about building wise families in an insane world. Buy this book. Read this book. Let this book change you.

DANIEL GROTHE

Pastor and author of *The Power of Place*

turn down the noise

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INTRODUCTION



Sitting in the passenger seat, I quickly turned the air-conditioning to full power and aimed it toward my face. The air blew my hair back, as if I were some famous singer with an onstage wind fan, but even the cool air wasn't enough to calm my flushed face.

My agitation was building. Everything was annoying me. My family was annoying me. The cars on the road were annoying me. Even the smiles of people walking their dogs outside were annoying me. Although there were golden skies and palm trees swaying outside the window, inside the car a storm was brewing.

It had been two weeks since we'd moved our young family from Australia to California. My children, then two and four, had endured a fourteen-hour plane flight, followed by a week of jet lag, while my husband, Colin, and I were running a million miles an hour trying to set up life in a new country. Everything felt hard.

The bank wouldn't let us open an account without a document from the government. The government wouldn't issue the document without a bank account.

The rental properties wanted a strong credit rating, but because we were coming from another country, our credit rating was nonexistent.

We were temporarily living in a vacation home while we tried to secure a long-term lease. We were living out of eight suitcases while the rest of our belongings would be arriving by ship in the coming weeks.

And my children were exhausted and hungry, refusing to eat the food in this new country because it tasted “weird,” upset that their toys hadn’t arrived yet, and overwhelmed by all the change over the past few weeks.

After a long day of frustrating phone calls and appointments, when the kids were clingy, we decided to put everyone in the car and go to a local playground by the beach. We hoped the break and fresh air would do everyone good. But the car ride wasn’t doing anyone any good.

The kids were whining, asking why I didn’t buy the “proper” food and if I could go back to the store right now to get the bread they liked (which was only available in Australia). Colin, who was also frustrated by the resistance we were facing about getting life set up, was playing music loudly. Then one of the kids requested a specific song, and when Colin put it on, the other child screamed, “That’s unfair!” and a fight broke out.

That’s when I lost it. I yelled, “Everyone be quiet! I am sick and tired of the complaining!” Then I went on a long, emotional rant about how much was going on, how I was doing my best, and how it was all too much.

The kids were crying now—not because of their fight, but because I’d raised my voice.

Then I started crying because of the overwhelm, exhaustion, and guilt that comes from reacting to the people you love in ways you don’t love.

Overstimulation is an invisible epidemic in our world. It’s a problem for children, parents, families, grandparents, teachers, and anyone who works with children. Yet we often don’t notice how prevalent the problem has become and how it is impacting our daily lives.

We see glimpses . . .

We notice how screen time is affecting our children.

We have a nagging sense that the busyness we experience on a regular basis is not ideal.

We are overwhelmed when dealing with our children’s big emotions, and we feel guilty about our own emotional reactions toward our children.

We worry that our exhaustion is negatively affecting our ability to parent and lead the children in our lives.

But all too often, these glimpses are overshadowed. Life keeps moving, and we're using all our energy to keep up. It's inescapable: overstimulation is the cultural air we breathe. Yet the problem of overstimulation and chronic stress is much broader and deeper than the glimpses we notice throughout our days.

In the last couple of decades, we've seen significantly increased rates of mental illness in children and adolescents (in particular, anxiety and depression). This trajectory was already on the rise before the spring of 2020, and in 2021 it was found that one in four youths under the age of eighteen are experiencing symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression.¹ There has also been a significant increase in attentional struggles and behavioral problems among children.

There are, of course, many driving factors behind these statistics. Yet even though we are more educated about resilience and emotional health than ever—we have more access to individualized professional support, and there is less of a stigma about going to therapy—the statistics are still heading in the wrong direction.

So what's going on?

An Environment of Overstimulation

For many years, I believed that I had a “black thumb.” This is a nice way of saying that despite all my best intentions, I seemed to kill most of the plants I tried to grow.

I had dreams of a thriving garden. I would visit nurseries or other people's gardens and marvel at how they were able to cultivate such healthy plants. But whether they were herbs on our apartment balcony or a pot of flowers at our front door, my plants would last only a short time before they died. I became too scared to buy more plants. Then, a few years ago, I finally made up my mind that I was going to work this thing out.

My husband, Colin, and I bought two raised gardening beds for our backyard and filled them with soil. I researched the easiest flowers to

grow and read about zinnias. My two children and I planted the seeds straight into the soil and, in just a few months, reaped a bed of bright, colorful, thriving flowers.

After this experience, my confidence in gardening soared. I became overly zealous and, without looking much into different types of flowers, bought every seed I liked and planted them all in my garden. To my dismay, while some of the flowers grew, most of them didn't even sprout.

I returned to my faithful zinnias, confused about why my gardening efforts were failing again. It wasn't until I researched the seeds and gardening zones that my mistake became clear.

A major lesson in Gardening 101 is being aware of what zone you're in. These zones define the environmental conditions of your garden. Not all plants thrive in every environment. The reason the zinnias had bloomed so beautifully was because they grow well in most zones.

If a plant isn't growing, experienced gardeners know to look first for what is (or isn't) happening in the environment rather than blaming the plant.

As Alexander den Heijer says, "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."²

This is as true in raising children as it is in cultivating a garden. What if the increasing rates of burnout, emotional and behavioral challenges, and mental illness are not the problem? What if, instead, they are *symptoms* of the problem?

What if the problem of overstimulation in our world is a problem with our *environment*, not a problem with us or our children?

The world has changed. Our children are growing up in a very different world from the one we grew up in. We are parenting in a different world from the one we grew up in. There is more choice, complexity, and pressure than ever before.

Yet this change of environment has happened so slowly that it can be easy to miss it.

The increased pressure at school and work.

The increased pace of life.

The decreased free time.

The way technology has fundamentally changed the way we interact with one another.

When you look at any one of these changes individually, they don't necessarily explain why the chronic stress of children and adolescents has skyrocketed. But like most parts of life, it isn't just about one thing; the problem is the compounding of *all* the things, the way a snowball rolling down a mountain gradually gains momentum and size. If you've felt bowled over by the exhaustion of daily life—flattened by the sheer amount of noise in your home, your schedule, your brain—you aren't alone. And it's not your fault.

The underlying assumption in our culture is that strong individuals should thrive no matter their environmental conditions, no matter the pace or demands of their life, no matter the circumstances of their grief, no matter their endless exposure to troubling world events and information. If the individual breaks under the pressure, society is quick to label them as weak or less resilient, without pausing to question the environment they're living in. We don't necessarily need to "fix" our children or ourselves; it's the environment we're living in that's making us sick.

How I Came to This Work

I began my career studying psychology because I was (and still am) deeply interested in how we *become*—how we grow, develop, and transform into healthier versions of ourselves. I worked in church and community organizations with youths before my husband and I began a consulting business teaching resilience principles to corporations going through major transitions.

I felt prompted into further study in my late twenties and started a program to get my master's in educational psychology, with a focus on child and adolescent development. I planned to complete my degree in one year while also working part-time with our business. Toward the end of that year, Colin and I decided we wanted to start a family. We were excited about what the next season might hold for us.

Then one Friday morning in November, I was sitting on our

apartment balcony in the early morning sun, having a cup of tea. I was exhausted after completing my final thesis the night before. I would be handing it in for the completion of my master's that day.

Then my phone rang.

It was my doctor, whom I'd seen at a routine appointment a few weeks earlier, saying they'd found some inconsistencies in testing a lump on my neck. He was clearing his schedule and wanted me to come in immediately. My mind went blank. I couldn't quite understand what this was or why it required immediate attention, and then came the word that turned my world upside down: *cancer*.

In the movies when someone gets devastating news, the world slows down and starts spinning. This happens in life too—people's voices get muffled and time moves in slow motion as everything you once knew no longer feels real.

During the next eighteen months, I was treated for an aggressive form of thyroid cancer, with multiple surgeries, radiation sessions, and other treatments that left me so fatigued I had to take leave from work. I went from feeling hopeful and certain about the future to questioning everything about who I was and what my future might look like.

I'd been studying and teaching resilience for years, but I didn't feel resilient during this experience. I felt sad, fearful about what my future might look like, shaken in my identity and my faith, and confronted with my mortality. I felt as if my life were on pause while everyone else was just moving along as usual.

After a year and a half of treatment, I was declared in remission, and we were given the all clear to start a family. I quickly became pregnant, and we were blessed with our wonderful son.

I'll never forget the moment when he was placed on my chest. My world changed forever with the weight of unconditional love and the responsibility of shepherding a little heart in the world.

Just over two years later, we were blessed again to welcome our beautiful daughter, and my heart expanded all over again.

The transformational experience of becoming a mother, so close to

the life-altering experience of cancer, made me realize how important it is to cultivate resilience and emotional health for the next generation. I can't control the circumstances my children will have to walk through, but I can provide a loving foundation and the skills to equip them to handle hard things.

When my son was five years old, I founded Resilient Little Hearts, an educational company that resources parents, educators, and professionals to support resilience and emotional health in children. We do this through educational content, online courses, and children's books. Our passion is to equip the next generation with the skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Hope for the Next Generation

We can't change the world our children are living in. Despite our desire to make the world safe and beautiful for them, this isn't always within our ability to do.

What we *can* influence is the environment they experience during their childhood and adolescent years. We can also help them cultivate the skills they need to navigate the world in healthy ways as they mature.

That is what this book is about.

In part 1 of this book, we look at how overstimulation and chronic stress impact our children and practical ways we can reduce these inputs. The goal is to bring the problem out of the shadows so we can see it for what it is and be empowered to do something about it.

In part 2, we look at the keys to raising emotionally healthy children, including cultivating strong, healthy relationships, teaching emotional regulation and coping tools, and growing in our own emotional maturity along the way. This is important because the healthier and better equipped we become, the more we'll be able to create a healthy environment for our children to thrive.

In part 3, we look at five practices to use when we become aware that we or our children are struggling with overstimulation or chronic stress. These aren't more things to add to your to-do list but rather a toolbox of

options to use when you need them. As we implement these practices, they increase our capacity to recover and build resilience.

The purpose of this book is to equip you in your everyday life. Not your perfectly curated, I'm-on-top-of-everything, winning-at-life life, but your real life—made up of endless sleepless nights, the juggling of work and children's schedules, a messy home (no matter how much you try to clean it), and lots of ugly crying (from you as well as your children!). Maybe you feel alone in building your family, maybe you feel completely frustrated with a certain child, maybe you're overwhelmed by the demands of just keeping up, or maybe you're struggling with pangs of guilt before falling asleep at night as you run through the list of things you wish you'd done better that day.

Raising children is beautiful and challenging. Building a home is raw, tender, hard work. It's my hope that the strategies shared in this book will positively impact your *real* life.

I'm not promising that after you read this book you'll never feel overstimulated or stressed again. I'm not promising that your children will never be overstimulated or that family life will become effortless and easy. (Wouldn't that be nice?)

That is not realistic.

My hope is that after reading this book, you'll be able to recognize the signs of overstimulation and chronic stress more quickly and feel confident to respond with a toolbox of options for navigating it so you can build recovery and resilience for yourself and your family.

This is how we cultivate emotionally healthy children: one family, one classroom, one relationship at a time.

This is how we cultivate emotionally healthy children: one family, one classroom, one relationship at a time.

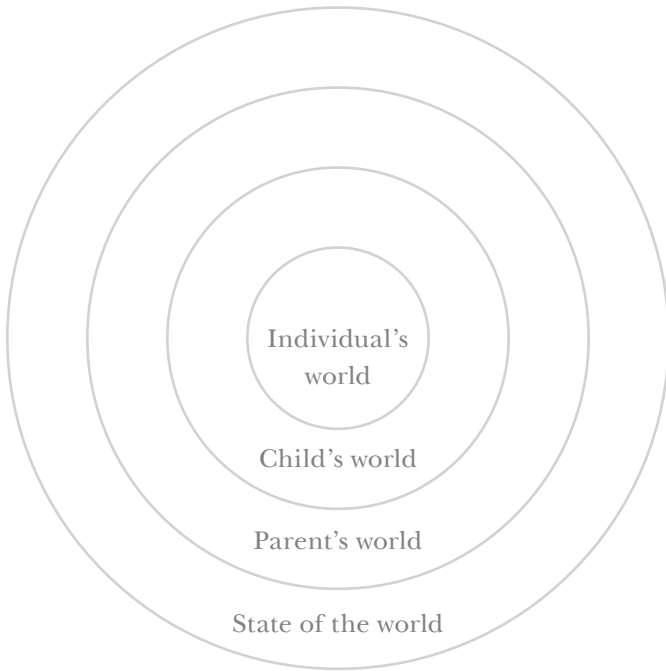
It's my belief that generations should grow from strength to strength. It's my hope and prayer that we can change the current trajectory of mental health statistics in this country so our children—and the next generation—can thrive.

It's time to turn down the noise.

PART ONE

Finding Freedom
from Overstimulation
and Chronic Stress





HOW LOUD IS YOUR WORLD?



We will make the whole universe a noise
in the end. . . . The melodies and silences
of Heaven will be shouted down.

C. S. LEWIS

Local residents often enjoyed the lakefront shores of the harbor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the 1970s, having picnics and eating ice cream. The gentle breeze and the pink hues of the setting sun painted a picturesque scene of summer in the Midwest.

A few miles into the harbor stood the Milwaukee Breakwater Lighthouse. With two-story art deco–style lighthouse keeper’s quarters, it was a structure of safety and beauty on the water.

Attached to this lighthouse was a foghorn that regularly sounded a loud, low drone. It had to be loud enough for ships to hear over two nautical miles away. The foghorn sounded whenever ships came into the harbor or when weather conditions changed. Sometimes it blared every fifteen seconds.

Many local residents grew used to the sound of the foghorn. Some even associated it with nostalgic memories of spending time along the lakefront. Even though the noise was constant, it wasn’t something many people paid much attention to.

Yet there was one individual who noticed the consistent volume of the foghorn—and he was fed up with it.

Kenneth Schermerhorn was the conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. As an expert on sound, with a sensitive ear, he issued a formal complaint to the US Coast Guard (which was also printed in the local newspaper). Kenneth stated that the intensity of the foghorn, along with its frequency, was a “flagrant form of noise pollution” that not only negatively impacted the study of music and performance but also inhibited one’s ability to properly tune a piano.¹ Although he was aware that the sound was needed for the safety of the ships in the harbor, he was concerned about how far the noise was carrying inland and interrupting life there.

Kenneth, who had a deep understanding of sound, was the first to notice the problem with the noise.

The Increase of Noise

Our world has become increasingly filled with noise. It’s estimated that noise pollution doubles or triples every thirty years.² Much of this change is the result of urbanization, which dramatically increases land and air traffic, as well as neighborhood and city development. Car alarms, lawn mowers, and sirens are the background noise to our homes—homes that are also louder inside with technological developments such as televisions, speakers, and music in our headphones.

The World Health Organization reports that noise pollution is the second most dangerous environmental toxin, after air pollution.³ Noise pollution disrupts sleep and heart health, and can even lead to long-term hearing loss.

Noise pollution is so harmful because our brains interpret loud noise as a threat. Even when we logically understand that the noise we’re hearing isn’t dangerous, it still unconsciously inundates our nervous system with low-grade stress.

Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist, says that “silence is an endangered species on the verge of extinction.”⁴ This belief has motivated

him to advocate for and protect the last “quiet places”—areas across the United States that are currently untouched by human sound or noise pollution. For an area to qualify as a quiet place, it has to have multiple fifteen-minute intervals with no human sound interruptions (such as air traffic or construction). Gordon has named the Hoh Rain Forest in Olympic National Park, Washington, as possibly the quietest place in the United States. He calls it “One Square Inch of Silence.”⁵

For many of us, it wasn't until the pandemic prompted worldwide lockdowns that we noticed the noise. It was only once the traffic on the roads and in the air ceased that we began to notice the birdsong. The cheerful whistles and peeps from these tiny creatures provided a glimmer of hope during a challenging time, and somehow the birds' singing seemed clearer and louder than usual.

Yet it wasn't just the lack of background noise or our increased focus that made the birdsong seem louder. Scientists explained that during the lockdown, the birds were recovering an acoustic strength and range of song they had lost decades before as a result of high levels of noise. The background noise in the environment had changed the way the birds were singing and communicating.⁶

Noise changes the way we interact in the world.

Noise changes the way we interact in the world.

When we think about the increase of noise in our world, it's not just physical noise that we should be concerned about. Another kind of noise that's becoming louder is the foghorn of chronic stress—the constant drone of increased pressure, pace, complexity, and choice.

We are living in an environment where the volume—literal and figurative—is turned up too high. And when things get too loud, we become overstimulated.

Family Life Is Overstimulating

It was 9:30 on a Saturday morning, and I had just gotten dressed for the day. I was in my bedroom doing my makeup in front of our wardrobe

mirror. Within seconds, my daughter came into my bedroom and started talking to me about an art project she wanted to try, asking if I could organize her supplies. Before I could answer, my son walked into my room and began to talk to me (over the voice of his sister) about a new trading card he'd acquired and why it was a great card. Then, before I could answer either of them, my husband walked in, and without noticing that I currently had two children talking to me about different things at the same time, started talking to me about a business idea he just had.

I was standing there with my mascara in my hand, looking straight ahead into the mirror, wondering how long it would take anyone in my family to realize that they were all talking to me at the same time. And the problem was, I wasn't hearing any of them.

Neuroscientists call overstimulation a state of "frazzle," or cognitive overwhelm that occurs when you're overcome by too much sensory input—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, as well as internal sensations such as pain or discomfort—causing you to struggle with processing your environment.

It doesn't matter whether you're an introvert or extrovert—if you're the life of the party or if you like things quiet—family life is filled to the brim with sensory input. Home is often a place filled with crying, tantrums, fights between siblings, and all the noise that results from joy, play, and discovery.

For parents, it's overstimulating because children are loud and have no filter, and because being a parent is demanding and stressful, and often requires that we multitask to get anything done. Even though neuroscience studies show that individuals who multitask experience frazzle and overwhelm more often than those who don't multitask,⁷ it's often an unavoidable reality for a parent. This season of life involves tending to the constant needs of your children and providing financially for them, while also navigating your own health, relationships, and commitments.

Children are easily overstimulated. As they grow and their brains develop, they are slowly increasing their capacity to handle more sensory input. Yet because of the stimulation of our world and their stage of development, children can become overstimulated regularly. Many times what looks like a tantrum from our child is actually overstimulation. This is particularly true when our child isn't fighting us over a specific request.

This was Rachel's experience. It was only two weeks before Christmas, and Rachel still hadn't finished her holiday shopping. Pregnant with her second child, she placed her two-year-old son, Jack, into the stroller, determined to finish shopping for gifts.

The stores were decorated for the holidays, with bright flashing lights, decorations in every window, and holiday music playing loudly overhead. Although Rachel had arrived early, the shops were already crowded with people who were stressed and rushing about to find what they needed.

The first thirty minutes made Rachel think she would get her to-do list completed that day. Jack sat in the stroller, taking in the scene around him, and besides wanting snacks, he seemed mostly calm. She had purchased three presents from one store and now needed to go to two more shops before she was done.

The problem was, Jack was already done. He begged to get out of the stroller, so Rachel let him walk while she packed the stroller full of her purchases. It was difficult to chase after him, especially since she was pregnant. Then a crowd of shoppers went by, almost knocking Jack over before Rachel managed to get to him. Within seconds, Jack had spread his body across the wall, screaming so loudly that everyone in the store was looking, while he hit the wall harder and harder. Rachel scooped him up and tried to reason with him. Jack was screaming and trying to wrestle out of her arms, accidentally hitting her in the face so hard that she realized it was time to go home.

More often than not, overstimulation results in a heightened emotional reaction. Maybe for you, overstimulation manifests as irritability, emotional upset, aggressive outbursts, fatigue, brain fog, loss of focus, or a "spaced out" feeling. Maybe for your child it looks like endless crying, emotional meltdowns, aggressive outbursts, or being "out of it" (as if they aren't listening to you). When we look at this story through the lens of overstimulation, we can compassionately realize that Jack wasn't having a meltdown because he wanted Rachel to buy him a toy or ice cream. He was just tired and overwhelmed by the environment he was in.

There isn't anything wrong with you if you or your child have times of feeling overstimulated. This is a normal response to the experience of living in our overstimulating world!

Looking at the Whole Picture

Along with sensory input, overstimulation is also caused by a buildup of other noise underneath the surface. Imagine it's 5 p.m. and you're attempting to make dinner while simultaneously managing your children's needs (a sensory input nightmare), and *then* you add any variety of additional circumstances—you didn't sleep the night before, you're stressed about a financial situation, or you just had a conversation with someone who made you really angry. On the other hand, how would you feel in this same situation if you had a good night of sleep, felt steady about your finances, and just spent some time with one of your closest friends?

Overstimulation isn't just about the sensory input in a particular situation; it's also influenced by what's going on under the surface.



Each of us has a threshold for sensory input and stress. This refers to the amount of noise we can tolerate before we hit our limit and experience overstimulation.

Consider a balloon. You can blow air into the balloon over and over again, but at a certain point, if you keep blowing air into it, it's going to pop.

Some people have a higher threshold for stimulation than others; some have a lower threshold. But we all have a threshold.

You have a certain threshold for sensory input and stress.

Your child has a certain threshold for sensory input and stress.

If our life circumstances push beyond our threshold, we experience overstimulation and all the emotions that come with it.

There's no shame in wherever our threshold lies. Some individuals are more vulnerable to overstimulation than others, meaning they experience overstimulation more often and more quickly than others. This may include (but isn't limited to) individuals with:

- a genetic or underlying physical health condition
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- sensory processing disorder (SPD)
- differences in learning, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, or dyspraxia
- a highly sensitive personality
- a mental health condition, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or generalized anxiety
- a history of trauma

Children or parents with these differences experience overstimulation more frequently than others and often require additional strategies and support to navigate overstimulation.

There is nothing innately wrong when you or your children experience overstimulation; it's simply a signal from our bodies that requires listening to. The problem comes when overstimulation leads to ongoing chronic stress, which impacts the nervous system.

How the Body Responds to Stress

I was doing laundry when I heard a scream from my daughter's bedroom. My heart immediately started pumping more quickly as I rushed toward her, worried about what I would encounter. As I entered her bedroom, she screamed, "There's a spider!" When I turned to look at the wall where she was pointing, I saw a tiny spider, the size of a speck of dust. My body immediately relaxed. I took a deep breath and removed the spider from her bedroom.

This is the healthy dance of our nervous system. The nervous system is a complex network of nerves and cells that send signals to and from different parts of the body, controlling much of what our body thinks, feels, and does. We become stressed and our bodies are filled with energy so we can deal with the stressor, and then once the situation is resolved, we move back into a state of rest and repair.

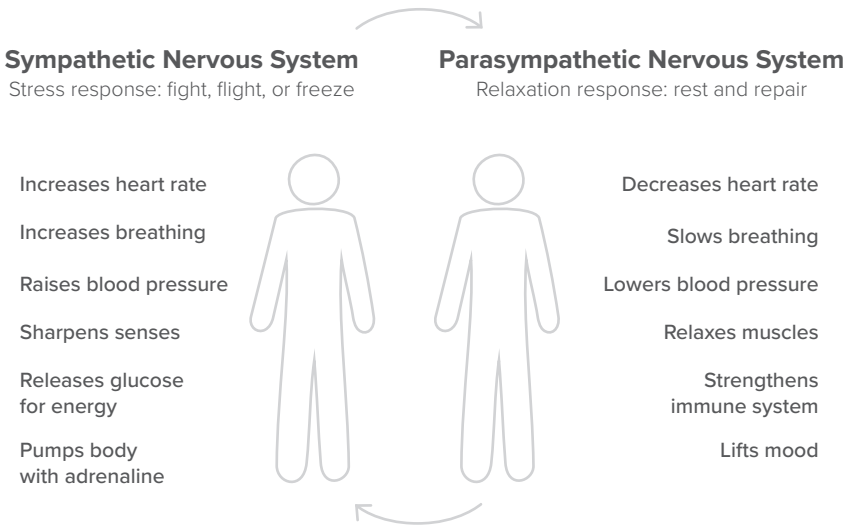
Our nervous system includes two main parts:

The **sympathetic nervous system** (SNS) is activated automatically when our bodies encounter a stressor (for example, a screaming child in another room). It mobilizes our fight, flight, or freeze response to deal with the stressor. It pumps our bodies with adrenaline, releases glucose for energy, increases our heart rate and breathing rate, raises our blood pressure, and slows down all "non-important" functions (such as digestion and reproduction). This reaction causes our sight, hearing, and other senses to become sharper and our bodies to become tense and more alert.

The **parasympathetic nervous system** (PNS) is activated when our bodies enter a state of rest and repair. Our heart rate decreases, our breathing slows down, our blood pressure lowers, our muscles relax, our immune system is strengthened, our mood lifts. This is a physiological state of relaxation and recovery. It is the feeling you experience after a really good meal or a full-body massage or when you finally get your children to sleep at night.

The sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system are designed to work in a flow, back and forth. When we become

stressed or overstimulated, our SNS activates, and then once the stressor is resolved, we relax into our PNS state. This back-and-forth dance between stress and recovery is the body's incredible way of keeping healthy and building resilience.



As much as we might wish that life consisted only of relaxing by the pool, we all know this is not reality. In fact, such a life would not actually move us toward health. Stress is good for us in many ways! It motivates us to get out of bed in the morning and helps us reach our peak performance when completing tasks. You can have a healthy, regulated nervous system even if you experience times of stress or negative emotions.

The problem occurs when the dance back toward recovery stops and we get stuck in a chronically stressed state. In psychology, this is referred to as a dysregulated nervous system, meaning the nervous system is not in the flow between activation and restoration. This means that we're not experiencing times of rest, relaxation, or repair.

This can happen to any of us. You know those days when everyone and everything feels annoying. You may be exhausted but also full of energy, wanting to sleep but not able to. You may feel that everything is urgent and important but you're failing at accomplishing any of it. You may start questioning yourself or your decisions or your whole life. You may feel agitated at the people you love and overly frustrated at minor inconveniences that arise.

If stress continues over a longer period of time, it can be significantly detrimental to our mental and emotional health. Studies show that chronic stress leads to burnout, physical health problems, and emotional disturbances, and it also contributes significantly to mental illness.⁸

When we think about individuals who experience chronic stress, we often think of people who have faced significant trauma or someone with an extremely demanding job. We usually don't think about ourselves. But the reality is, the day-to-day expectations and commitments of raising children in our world can lead to chronic stress. Parental burnout is becoming more common. Studies show that 66 percent of working parents report being burned out.⁹ These statistics increase when their child has attentional differences or mental health challenges, or if they are solo parenting. Studies also show that many stay-at-home parents struggle with burnout and depression.¹⁰

Burnout begins with feelings of overwhelming exhaustion, which over a longer period of time cause us to distance ourselves from our family (or anything we love), eventually resulting in feelings of numbness or a lack of fulfillment in parenting or life.

What's more, in the conversation about chronic stress, we almost never think about our children. They're children—what do they have to worry about? They don't face the financial demands or relational complexities that adults do. They aren't exposed to all the issues of the world the way we are. Could our children *really* be chronically stressed? The rising rates of mental illness and attentional challenges indicate they are.

Contributing Factors

There are multiple contributors to overstimulation and chronic stress. Being aware of them and being able to identify them for yourself and your child is a huge step toward reducing them. Over the next few chapters, we will unpack these contributors with the goal of bringing awareness about them and finding simple, practical ways to reduce them.

This begins with the individual's world, looking at each person's threshold for stimulation and stress. Some people are more vulnerable to overstimulation and chronic stress because of their temperament, neurodiversity, or past trauma. Being aware of each individual's threshold gives us a helpful starting point to help our family thrive.

Next, we look at the child's world. Children have a significantly lower threshold for stimulation and stress than adults do. In addition, the landscape of childhood has changed over the years, with small changes compounding to create a more stressful environment. As we unpack these developmental differences and changes in culture and education, we will be able to reduce the overstimulation and chronic stress for our children.

Then we dive deep into the parent's world—your world. So many adults, especially parents, report feeling overwhelmed, yet we desperately don't want our stress to negatively impact our children. We also don't know how to change this for ourselves (in real life, it doesn't work to just “stress less” or go to a spa). We look at the key influences in parents' stress, along with practical ways to reduce them.

Finally, we look at the state of the world, with the cultural messages and beliefs that add pressure to our already overstimulated environment. As we unpack these messages, we can craft a more truthful and empowering belief system to give us confidence to live in a countercultural way.

So What Can We Do?

So are we just supposed to wrap ourselves and our children up in cotton wool and pretend that life isn't hard or challenging?

Such an approach is not only unrealistic but also unhelpful. Life has many challenges, and our role as parents is to prepare our children for the world. Instead, we need to increase our awareness of chronic stress and turn down the noise when it becomes too loud.

Tips for Navigating the Moment of Overstimulation

It was 4:13 on a Tuesday afternoon, and I was already *done* for the week. You know the feeling you're supposed to have at the end of the week? Yet it was only Tuesday. The past two days had included full days of work, with back-to-back meetings, new projects, and a lot of problems to solve. I needed to make decisions about future travel arrangements and summer schedules for my children, plus I had meetings after school with my kids' teachers. Then when I returned home, I needed to be available for all the emotions of kids who were exhausted after a long day of school, in addition to cooking dinner and doing our evening routine.

I was standing in front of my fridge, which was full of food, yet I couldn't think of anything to make for dinner. Truthfully, I didn't want to make dinner at all (I secretly wish some magical person would come and make dinner for me). Then one of my children called out, "Mom!" for the hundredth time since school pickup, with that whining tone that sounds like nails on a chalkboard. I took a deep breath. I was aware of how I was feeling, and I didn't want to take it out on them. I answered their questions and requests as patiently as I could, reminding them for the seventh time to start their homework.

Back in the kitchen, I got a message on my phone about a dress-up day at school that had just been announced (and it was in two days). My mind started racing about how I could organize a costume that quickly, feeling frustrated about another thing added to my list of obligations. I was still standing in front of the fridge. My heart started beating faster.

Then my other child called, "Mom!" and started asking about the new clothes I'd told them I'd buy, as they'd just had another growth spurt and no longer fit in most of their clothes. I explained that I hadn't had time to buy them yet. They expressed their frustration with me, and I reminded them again that it was time to start their homework.

I went back to the kitchen, trying to work out when I would have time to buy new clothes while at the same time wondering where time was going and how they were growing up so fast. I was still standing in front of the fridge. My heart was beating faster . . .

Then I heard screaming from the living room. I raced out to find both my kids fighting, one of them in tears and the other yelling. My mind was spinning, trying to figure out how to navigate the situation, while also frustrated that they still hadn't started their homework. I was overwhelmed by my exhaustion and my to-do list, and I still had no idea what to make for dinner.

I couldn't tell if my head was about to explode or if I was going to burst into tears.

When we experience overstimulation in our everyday lives, it can feel as if we are stuck with no way to get out. Sometimes when it's repetitive, happening day after day, we can begin to feel hopeless that these feelings could change. The truth is there are some practical steps you can take to ensure that you can confidently navigate this emotional experience.

Here is a process to help you navigate the moments of overstimulation for yourself or your child.

1. TEMPORARILY REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE ENVIRONMENT

It's difficult to calm your stress while you are still in the scenario that's causing you stress. The first step in navigating overstimulation is to temporarily remove yourself from the situation.

If you're overstimulated, this might mean walking outside in the fresh air for a few minutes or locking yourself in your bedroom or bathroom to catch your breath (of course, after making sure your children are safe).

If your young child is overstimulated, you might scoop them up into your arms and take them to a quieter place in your home, away from other children, or leave the playground to sit in the shade for a while.

If your older child or teenager is overstimulated, you might create a space for them at home that's theirs to escape to (such as their own room or a specific place in the house), or you might allow them to listen to

music or an audiobook with headphones on. You might also give them verbal permission to leave the group or activity if they need to and go to an agreed-upon place.

2. DO SOMETHING THAT HELPS YOU RETURN TO CALM OR CHANGES YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE

What helps someone return to calm varies for each individual. It also varies depending on how much time or freedom you have to employ calming techniques.

This could include anything that's quiet and calming, something that prompts laughter, or an activity that distracts you from the current situation. You could pray or meditate, listen to an audiobook, walk barefoot on the grass, water the garden, or go for a short walk or run (if someone can stay with your child). This might also include any activity that changes your emotional state, such as getting everyone outside or having a dance party or announcing you're having pancakes for dinner.

Warm and cold therapies also help regulate our nervous system. Cold therapies have been shown to reduce cortisol levels; reduce stress, anxiety, and depression; and improve mood.¹¹ Heat therapies have been found to induce relaxation, increase blood flow, and relieve pain.¹² To use these therapies, you could take a drink of cold water, chew ice, run your wrists under cold water, or stand in front of a fan, air conditioner, or freezer. Alternatively, you could make a cup of hot tea or coffee, lie on a heat mat, or take a hot bath.

For a younger child, you could give them a hug or provide quieter activities for them to do, such as drawing, playing with Legos, looking at books, listening to calming music or an audiobook, playing with water outside, or taking a warm bath.

For an older child or teenager, you could sit with them if they need to talk or allow them space to themselves, go on a walk with them, have them swim in cold water (if you have a pool or are close to the ocean), have them listen to an audiobook or music, or have them take a warm shower or bath.

You know your child or teenager best, so pay attention to what causes them to feel calm, and support them to do more of that.

It's important to mention that scrolling your phone (which most of us naturally do when we're feeling overstimulated because we're looking for relief and distraction) tends to make the overstimulation worse. This is because although you may find some funny memes or videos (which can be distracting and hilarious), you will also be shown information that is upsetting, scary, or anger-inducing. If you're looking to reduce your overstimulation in the moment (and if the other strategies aren't working for you), you'd be better off watching a few minutes of your favorite show or comedian on Netflix than accessing a social media platform.

3. REPAIR, IF YOU NEED TO

In the moment of overstimulation, we may say or do things we later regret. The same is true for children. It's important that we don't ignore this break. Once everyone has returned to calm, we need to do the emotional work of repairing the relational connection.

Relationships aren't perfect. We all make mistakes. We might lose our temper, yell, or say critical words. Healthy relationships aren't those that never have problems but those in which each party takes ownership of their mistakes and works to repair them. (This refers to the everyday mistakes of parenting and isn't addressing or condoning neglect or abuse.)

Even if there was a reason behind your hurtful words or actions (overstimulation or your child doing the wrong thing), your actions still hurt your child and created a rupture in the relationship. When you take responsibility for your actions and apologize, you are repairing this emotional connection, maintaining the fabric of trust for a healthy relationship. You are also modeling "best practices," holding yourself to the same standards that you're trying to teach them. As children become older and move into adolescence, they become very attuned to hypocritical behavior—instances when you set boundaries on their behavior while not following these expectations yourself.

If your child has overstepped boundaries in your home, it's important to talk with them about it once they've returned to calm. First, normalize their emotions. There shouldn't be punishment for thoughts or feelings; our role is to guide them toward appropriate behaviors. This may involve having a conversation with them about how we behave in our home or asking them to clean up the mess they made during their meltdown. This isn't about shaming them for their behavior but about guiding them toward more appropriate behaviors in the future.

Repairing our relationship allows us to begin again.

While my kids were still screaming and I was attempting to comfort both of them, my husband entered the room, announcing he'd finished work early and was wondering if we wanted to go to the beach.

Having him finish work early was a rare occurrence, and even though we're lucky enough to live only ten minutes from the beach, we almost never go on a school night. My mind was running through all the things not yet done, but when both the kids stopped crying and yelled, "Yes!" I knew it was the right thing to do.

As we walked onto the beach, my son ran ahead and jumped into the waves, closely followed by my husband. My daughter took my hand, and we walked toward the shallow water together. Her pure joy was apparent from her giggles and squeals as the cold water enveloped her legs. As I stood there with my feet in the water, I felt my whole body relax. The waves began to wash away my overwhelm. Underneath it all was a woman feeling the weight of the world and all these little hearts and big people relying on her.

But for that moment, the waves of the sea were able to wash it all away.

Turn Down the Noise Today

It might seem daunting to think about turning down the noise in such a loud world, but you can start with small steps (which add up to a big difference!). Here are some suggestions for turning down the volume that you can try this week.

1. Pre-organize one or two calming activities for yourself or your child that you can quickly grab for moments that begin to feel overstimulating. You might load an audiobook on your phone or pack a small bag of Legos and drawing supplies for your child.
2. Begin to notice if there are consistent times or days that are overstimulating, and make a plan for them. For example, if you are repeatedly overstimulated during the preparation and cooking of dinner, you might consider making dinner earlier in the day (or finding that magical person I'm still looking for to prepare it for you!). If your teenager is repeatedly overstimulated in the car after school, you might consider bringing snacks and headphones for them in the car. When you notice the repeated moments, you can plan ahead for them.
3. Try one new calming technique for yourself this week, and pay attention to how it feels. This could be quietness, distraction, humor, cold therapy, or heat therapy. Remember, everyone is different, so don't be discouraged if some of these strategies don't work for you—just keep trying until you find one that does.