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HOME

IN THIS ISSUE

CALENDAR

FAMILY DIRECTORY

EVERYCHILD

BABYMAP

PATHWAYS

PAST ISSUES

CLASSIFIEDS

### Help your teenager tame stress with journaling

**Ages & Stages: 15-18**  
By Sarah Kahne

When Brittany Fremont entered her freshman year of high school, it seemed her life was falling apart. Her mother had abandoned her to pursue a life of drugs, leaving her on the steps of her grandmother's Seattle home. As if dealing with the stress of being a teenager wasn't enough, Fremont was left trying to cope with her new family life, her rage toward her mother, and trying to catch up with curriculum at her new school. She sunk into a deep depression.

"My grandmother could see me starting to self-destruct and she sent me to therapy," Fremont says. "At first I just rebelled against my therapist and my group. It wasn't until he recommended using a journal that things started to turn around."

Fremont, now 18, is preparing to receive her GED and has recaptured some of that feisty individualism that she lost when her mom left.

"I still have my days. I still get angry at my mom," she says. "But I've just found more positive ways of dealing with it now." Fremont hangs on to the dozens of composition books she's filled over the years. "I might need to read through them now and again to keep me moving forward," she says.

Diana, also 18, has been in and out of the foster care system for a decade, and was a frequent patient at Children's Hospital in Seattle. She suffered from serious health problems and emotional issues from being shuffled in and out of different homes. Now, Diana says, writing her feelings in her journal is helping her deal with those challenges. It's a way to "write out" her frustrations. "Sometimes doctors do or say things that make me really mad, but instead of being mad, I can just write until I feel better," she says. "That way I don't lose friends because I'm grouchy."

#### An important tool for teens

Therapists, doctors, social workers and teachers have all found journaling to be a productive tool - particularly for at-risk teenagers. Steffanie Lorig is the executive director of the Seattle-based nonprofit Art with Heart. "Many programs and hospitals across the country utilize the healing benefits of journaling with teens who are depressed, chronically ill, are dealing with violent or traumatic past histories, or are struggling with addiction," Lorig says.

And journaling can benefit teens who are just dealing with the usual pressures of life. Lorig says children who learn to express themselves through creative writing or drawing are better equipped to share feelings and experiences that might otherwise be too scary to communicate verbally.

"The exercise of listening to your inner emotions and then letting them go helps to strengthen developing self-identity and confidence, while at the same time improving written communication and artistic skills. It becomes an important tool in clarifying personal goals and values," she says.

Art with Heart has created a line of therapeutic books that promote healing through the arts. "As we all know, teens, especially, are susceptible to mood swings and often aren't shown how to express their feelings in positive and constructive ways," says Lorig.

The organization offers the *Chill & Spill* journal, which allows teens to scream, laugh, shout or put in a safe environment.

#### A life-changing exercise

# TOC

Feb. 2007

**Feature**

[Arts](#)

**Ages & Stages**

[0-2](#)

[3-5](#)

[6-10](#)

[11-14](#)

[15-18](#)

**Out & About**

[Gardening](#)

[Explorations](#)

[Voice](#)

[Taste](#)

[Media](#)

**Parent Edu**

[Postings](#)

[Watch](#)

[Letters](#)

[Editor](#)

**School Ready**

**Bonus**

[Open House](#)

[Park Hopping](#)

Cameron Bjornestad, a North Thurston High School teacher in Lacey, says she uses journals in her special-education classes. In many cases, her students are performing below standards because of learning disabilities. For Bjornestad, the overall goal of journal writing is to help students become more proficient and, ultimately, pass the WASL. While the goal is usually educational, there are times when her assignments become life-altering. One shy, withdrawn girl would barely participate in class, but she would complete journal assignments. One such assignment prompted a forgotten memory of childhood abuse. The girl was able to seek help from school counselor and begin to deal with the tragedy.

"It's thrilling to see kids who have been detached thrive with journals," Bjornestad says. "When they do that, it is cause for celebration and it helps me connect with them."

"Other pieces of school start falling into place," she adds. "I see them maturing and really improving both socially and academically."

### Writing for better health

Journaling may even have physical benefits for teens. University of Texas researcher Dr. James Pennebaker in his book, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, explores how writing down thoughts and feelings can improve both physical and mental health. He concludes that the benefits include improved blood pressure, insomnia, psychological well-being, and immune function.

Lorig sees other benefits, as well. "Journaling can help people problem-solve, process events by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved," she says. "Relationships can improve, focus can improve; it can strengthen the immune system, counteract the negative effects of stress, and can increase emotional intelligence. All of these things can lead to better communication, more self-confidence, more clarity and understanding."

"At the smallest level, creativity and self-expression relieves tension," Lorig says. "On the grandest level, it changes lives."

**Sarah Kahne** is a freelance journalist and mother of a 5-year-old boy.

### Resources for journaling

- To learn more about Art with Heart or to purchase the *Chill & Spill* journal, visit [www.artwithheart.org](http://www.artwithheart.org).
- For waterproofed journals for your outdoorsy teen, visit [www.nomadjournals.com](http://www.nomadjournals.com).
- A movement to help children of deployed soldiers stay in tune with their emotions is underway. Read more at [www.survivingdeployment.com/journalingkids](http://www.survivingdeployment.com/journalingkids).
- Journaling has also proved successful for children with special needs. Learn more at [http://specialchildren.about.com/od/mental\\_healthissues/qt/teachjournal](http://specialchildren.about.com/od/mental_healthissues/qt/teachjournal).
- Educators have found journaling to be quite successful in the classroom. Find out more at [www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr144.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr144.shtml).

[↑ back to top](#)

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