

Helping kids Deal with stress

Kids get to play and they don't have jobs, but they still have plenty to worry about. Stress from things like school and social situations can feel overwhelming for kids, particularly if they don't have healthy strategies to cope with strong feelings and solve everyday problems.

A recent KidsHealth® KidsPoll showed that kids deal with stress in both healthy and unhealthy ways, and while they may not initiate a conversation about what's bothering them, they do want their parents to reach out and help them cope with their feelings.

But it's not always easy for parents to know how to connect with a child who's feeling stressed.

Here are a few ideas:

Notice out loud. Tell your child when you notice something he or she might be feeling. ("It seems like you're still mad about what happened at the playground"). This shouldn't sound like an accusation (as in, "OK, what happened now? Are you still mad about that?") or put a child on the spot. It's just a casual observation that you're interested in hearing more about your child's concern.

Listen to your child. Ask your child to tell you what's wrong. Listen attentively and calmly — with interest, patience, openness, and caring. Avoid any urge to judge, blame, lecture, or say what you think your child should have done instead. The idea is to let your child's concerns (and feelings) be heard. Try to get the whole story by asking questions like "And then what happened?" Take your time. And let your child take his or her time, too.

Comment briefly on the feelings you think your child was experiencing. For example, you might say "That must have been upsetting," "No wonder you felt mad when they wouldn't let you in the game," or "That must have seemed unfair to you." Doing this shows that you understand what your child felt, why, and that you care. Feeling understood and listened to helps your child feel connected to you, and that is especially important in times of stress.

Put a label on it. Many kids do not yet have words for their feelings. If your child seems angry or frustrated, use those words to help him or her learn to identify the emotions by name. Putting feelings into words helps your child communicate and develop emotional awareness — the ability to recognize his or her own emotional states. A child who can do so is less likely to

reach the behavioral boiling point where strong emotions get demonstrated through behaviors rather than communicated with words.

Help your child think of things to do. Suggest activities your child can do to feel better now and to solve the problem at hand. Encourage your child to think of a couple of ideas. You can get the brainstorm started if necessary, but don't do all the work. Your child's active participation will build confidence. Support the good ideas and add to them as needed. Ask, "How do you think this will work?" Sometimes talking and listening and feeling understood is all that's needed to help a child's frustrations begin to melt away. Other times try changing the subject and moving on to something more positive and relaxing. Don't give the problem more attention than it deserves.

Just be there. Sometimes kids don't feel like talking about what's bothering them. Respect that, give your child space, and still make it clear that you'll be there when he or she does feel like talking. Even when kids don't communicate, they usually don't want parents to leave them alone. You can help your child feel better just by being there — keeping him or her company, spending time together. So if you notice that your child seems to be down in the dumps, stressed, or having a bad day — but doesn't feel like talking — initiate something you can do together. Take a walk, watch a movie, shoot some hoops, or bake some cookies. Isn't it nice to know that your presence really counts?

Be patient. As a parent, it hurts to see your child unhappy or worried. But try to resist the urge to fix every problem. Instead, focus on helping your child, slowly but surely, grow into a good problem-solver — a kid who knows how to roll with life's ups and downs, put feelings into words, calm down when needed, and bounce back to try again.

Remember that you can't fix everything, and that you won't be there to solve every problem as your child goes through life. But by teaching healthy coping strategies, you prepare your child to manage whatever stresses come in the future.