

Helping Kids Cope With Stress

To adults, childhood can seem like a carefree time. But kids still experience stress. Things like school and their social life can sometimes create pressures that can feel overwhelming for kids. As a parent, you can't protect your kids from stress — but you can help them develop healthy ways to cope with stress and solve everyday problems.

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 troubles.

But it's not always easy for parents to know what to do for a child who's feeling stressed. Here are a few ideas:

Notice out loud. Tell your child when you notice that something's bothering him or her. If you can, name the feeling you think your child is experiencing. ("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. Be sympathetic and show you care and want to understand.

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 supported by you, and that is especially important in times of stress.

Put a label on it. Many younger 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 kids communicate and develop emotional awareness — the ability to recognize their own emotional states. Kids who can do so are less likely to reach the behavioral boiling point where strong emotions come out through behaviors rather than communicated with words.

Help your child think of things to do. If there's a specific problem that's causing stress, talk together about what to do. Encourage your child to think of a couple of ideas. You can start the

brainstorming 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?"

Listen and move on. Sometimes talking and listening and feeling understood is all that's needed to help a child's frustrations begin to melt away. Afterward, try changing the subject and moving on to something more positive and relaxing. Help your child think of something to do to feel better. Don't give the problem more attention than it deserves.

Limit stress where possible. If certain situations are causing stress, see if there are ways to change things. For instance, if too many after-school activities consistently cause homework stress, it might be necessary to limit activities to leave time and energy for homework.

Just be there. Kids don't always feel like talking about what's bothering them. Sometimes that's OK. Let your kids know you'll be there when they do feel like talking. Even when kids don't want to talk, 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 stressed. 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.

Parents can't solve every problem as kids go through life. But by teaching healthy coping strategies, you'll prepare your kids to manage the stresses that come in the future.

Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital:

<https://www.hopkinsallchildrens.org/Patients-Families/Health-Library/HealthDocNew/Helping-Kids-Cope-With-Stress?id=0>