



Stress, Worry and Anxiety: How to Support Your Child

Stress

Stress is a normal physical response to an outside event, such as a threat, challenge, or an upsetting situation or circumstance. Usually the stress reaction subsides once the stressor or event is over. It is normal for children to experience stress at some point in their lives. Stress can serve important functions, such as helping children take action or keeping safe. Sometimes stressful conditions are chronic such as living with poverty, illness, or family problems.

Worry

Worry is what happens when the mind dwells on negative thoughts, uncertain outcomes or things that could go wrong. Worrying can sometimes be helpful. The brain is activated to take steps or problem solve. But too much worrying can lead to negative emotional states.

Anxiety

Anxiety can be thought of as an alarm reaction that is overly sensitive because it is happening when there is no real threat. The brain is programmed to respond to threat with a fear reaction. This reaction is very helpful when there is danger. It helps people automatically react in ways that will help them through the dangerous situation. Anxiety happens when a child thinks there is danger but they are actually safe.

Children will often try to stay away from these false alarm threats, which does not help them in the long run. While it is common for everyone to be anxious from time to time, anxiety becomes a problem if it lasts a long time, prevents your child from participating in things they enjoy or interferes with their daily life. Children with problematic anxiety may show changes in mood (being irritable), thinking (trouble concentrating), behaviors (avoiding non-dangerous situations, withdrawing) and physical responses (stomachaches, headaches, sleep difficulties)

What you can do to help your child with stress, worry and anxiety

Be aware of your own stress, worry and anxiety. Just like parents are told when flying in a plane to put their own oxygen mask on first before assisting their children, helping your child deal with stress and anxiety works better when you manage your own first. Children look to adults in their lives to make sense of what is happening and how to respond. Show your child how to handle stress and anxiety in a positive and healthy way. And *remember*, the same strategies work for both adults and children

Learn and use coping skills:

- Relaxation - calming the body
- Distraction - thinking about something else besides worries and fears

- Problem solving - identifying possible strategies and trying them out
- Meditation or mindfulness - focusing on the present moment
- Exercise - working off the stressful reactions
- Social support - talking and getting support from supportive others

Stick to routine: Predictability and consistency help children make it through stressful times.

Tend to the basics: Encourage children to be physically active, get enough sleep and eat nutritious meals.

Support facing fears: When children are having lower levels of worry or anxiety about non-dangerous situations or experiences, it is most helpful to gently encourage them to face up to the situations that make them anxious instead of allowing them to avoid. Support their efforts in doing something difficult and compliment them when they do. It is important for children to learn that their “worst case scenario” did not happen and/or that they can tolerate the situation. This is empowering for children.

In the Moment: If your child is in the middle of intense anxiety, *help them distract and calm themselves*: e.g., listen to a favorite song, jump rope or do some other physical activity for a few minutes; encourage slow breathing or tensing and relaxing of muscles to get through the moment.

When to Seek Professional Help:

When anxiety and worry is very intense, prolonged and interferes with the everyday functioning (e.g., not going to school, not engaging in normal activities), then it is time to consult a specialist. There are effective treatments for children who develop anxiety disorders. Seek out a professional with experience and training in treating anxiety disorders.