

Show Your Child How to Deal with Stress

As adults, we know it's tough to deal with stressful issues—problems with jobs, budgets and family matters. But when we see our children struggling with stressful issues, it can be heartbreaking.

For example, what if your child faced a bully at school? What if your child felt nervous about studying for a tough exam? Would you know how to help?

Other stressful issues kids face include tension with teachers, sibling rivalry and peer pressure to fit into a certain clique.

Share general guidelines for handling stress

- **Give your child a language to discuss feelings.** It's OK to let him hear you say: "I feel a little out of control today" or "I am very stressed out."
- **Let her observe *you* working through problems.** Your child will benefit from seeing you as a good role model for coping with stress. Otherwise, how can she learn?

Do not work out marriage problems or intense financial pressures in front of your child. However, do let her hear you and your mate discussing an article on marriage enhancement. Do let your child help you clip coupons to make your budget stretch.

- **Teach your child to respond, not react, to stress.** Responding means that we logically name the problem and figure out a plan to cope. Reacting means we stay stuck on talking about the problem—dramatizing it, until it gains power over us.

Teach your child to take control of problems

Stress arises when we feel out of control. Try to show your child the ropes for locating control. The minute we find control over a problem, we feel better about ourselves. Stress and self-esteem are interwoven. When children have high stress levels, their self-esteem can start to sag.

If your child is facing a problem, these coping measures can work:

- **Teach your child to assess a problem realistically.** If he doesn't assess a problem correctly, it will be next to impossible to find good answers. Tell your child, "We must all find 'control buttons' that truly match each problem."

For example, ask your child: "Is a bully just making empty threats—or do we need to get a legal restraining order?" Or, ask, "Will your exam really be that tough? Will it be manageable if you can map out a good study plan?"

- **Point out why it's good to find the *cause* of problems.** Explain to your child that most problems arise for a distinct reason. For instance, many problems develop when we lack a resource—such as time, money, tools or information.

For example, is your child's room messy? Would a bookcase or hooks for hanging things help? Has your child been late for school a lot? Would showering the night before help ease the morning crunch?

- **Demonstrate how all parties involved must take ownership.** For instance, if your child is clashing with another child, don't necessarily place blame on one person. Tell both children, "Let's all get involved in working this out." This reduces tension and gives everyone a stake in a productive outcome.

For example, Andrea, a mother of three, says her daughter was facing two bullies at school. The teacher told Andrea her daughter taunted the bullies—bringing the problem on herself; her best friend confirmed this. Andrea accompanied her child to confront the bullies one afternoon. “I was polite and non-confrontational,” says Andrea.

“I asked the ‘offenders’ to sit down with us on the school steps. I told them I wasn’t there to fuss or argue. I told them we all had to manage the situation as a group. I wanted my daughter to see that a solution can only work if all parties know what the outcome must be—and all support it. Otherwise, you’re back to square one. The girls took turns pledging cooperation, thank goodness. Everything cooled down. The bullying stopped.”

- **Show your child what she can control.** If possible, help your child manage as much of a situation as possible—without any help from you, a teacher or friends. This gives the child a sense of personal control.

“My robust 3-year-old daughter kept trying to shove my delicate 5-year-old down the stairs,” says Amy. “I told Shelby, ‘You must take control of this situation. Always allow your sister to go down the stairs first. Otherwise, she could shove you to the bottom, because she doesn’t understand the danger.’”

Amy says that Shelby was enormously relieved: “Shelby was proud that she could manage the situation by herself—without having to be a constant tattletale.”

By Judi Light Hopson
© 2002 Achieve Solutions