



Helping Children Cope with Stressful Situations

Children can feel stress at home or school and it can take a toll on them. Help children learn to reduce and cope with stress by using these strategies.

1. Identify Causes - If the cause of the stress isn't easily identifiable, keep a journal and write down times when the child is anxious or upset to determine patterns. Are there sleepless nights before a math test? Do they look anxious before going on the playground? Use these patterns to pinpoint the activities and situations that may be stressful for the child.

2. Discuss or Write About the Situation – Once you identify what is causing the stress, discuss or help children write about why it is stressful. For example, if they are stressed before every math test, they may fear getting a bad grade or feeling helpless. Write a list of things they can do to be proactive and reduce stress. In this example, they can study more, ask the teacher if they have a question, or know they are trying their best.

Developing proactive strategies is a way to feel more in control of the situation and reduce stress. Some situations will always be stressful, but often children think about the worst-case scenario rather than a realistic consequence. Children also



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may not realize other people also find the situation stressful. By discussing their feelings, the most likely outcome of the situation, and the fact that other people also experience stress, children's fears and feelings of loneliness may be decreased. Additionally, the simple act of talking or writing about something stressful or scary can help children feel better.

3. Reduce Opportunities for Stress – Some stressful situations are avoidable. For example, if soccer practice is stressful for a child because they don't enjoy the game and aren't very good at it, find another activity that is a better fit with their interests and abilities.

4. Find Ways to Relieve Stress – People of all ages feel stress and learning to cope with it in a positive way is a lifelong lesson. When a situation is stressful, sometimes taking a break is helpful. Give children a place to go and collect their thoughts before returning to the group. Teach them to say, "I need a break," or "Please give me a minute." Use physical fitness as a way to channel energy in a positive manner. Taking a walk, running, jumping rope, or playing catch can help children release tension and stress. If a child can't leave the setting, a stress ball is an easy to carry tool.

5. Prepare Children for New Situations – Often new situations are stressful for children. Read stories, write about, and discuss upcoming events to prepare children and set expectations. Encourage them to ask questions and let them know how a new event or change will affect them. Preparing for activities in advance can make the situation easier such as visiting a new school or sending a letter to the aunt and uncle they will visit.

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