



## Strategies for Helping Children Communicate in Stressful Situations

Communicating ideas, feelings, and interests can be extremely difficult for children in stressful situations. This article includes five strategies for teaching children how to use appropriate actions and words in difficult situations.

**1. Create a Break Phrase and Place** – Initial reactions to difficult situations such as not getting what you want, being called names, or doing poorly on a test are often emotional. Create a place where children can go when they are upset and teach them to say, “Excuse me. I need to take a break.” Use a phrase that is short, easy to remember, and useful for a variety of situations. Practice taking a break in places where there is no quiet area such as a grocery store. Practice stepping away from the situation, counting to ten, or visualizing a calming environment.



From *Feeling Frustrated*

**2. Avoid Repeating Stressful Situations** – Help children learn from the past. Although some situations are unavoidable, strategies can be developed to relieve stress in many situations. For example, if a child is stressed about homework because they regularly leave it at home, create a system to help the child remember their homework. Post visuals (words, drawings, or pictures) in highly visible locations to serve as reminders. Create a list of things that should be in the child’s bag (lunch, homework, pencils) and have them cross off the items before leaving. Develop a system that works for the child, is convenient, and requires little instruction or time so it is followed regularly.

**3. Role Play** – Stressful situations such as being bullied or hearing, “No” can cause immediate and inappropriate responses. Create a set of cards with difficult situations such as being bullied, not being able to join a group activity, leaving a notebook or bag on the school bus, or hearing a parent is running late to get them from school. Role play or discuss appropriate responses to these situations including what questions to ask and who to go to for help. For situations where taking a break is appropriate, practice asking to be excused. Include situations that have already occurred as role plays so children learn from the past. Show either how a child appropriately responded or role play and discuss what would have been better choices in the situation.

**4. Find an Appropriate Stress Reducer** – Squeezing a stress ball or bouncing on a trampoline are two examples of how children can exert their energy in a positive way when under stress. Teach children to use these kinds of items rather than reacting physically when upset. These items can serve as calming tools and allow children to focus on gathering their thoughts to communicate feelings and ideas. Small items like stress balls are easy to carry in a pocket and access in any environment.

**5. Write Things Down or Talk About Them** – If possible, take the time to write about or discuss situations. This is a great way for children to think things through. Have the child state what happened, how they felt, and what actions they could have taken. Discuss or have them write what would have been the most likely consequences for different choices.

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