

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

Tips for Parents

Below are several steps parents can take to help their children understand and cope with stressful situations. While most children will continue to function fairly normally, it is important for parents to be supportive and to help their children deal with difficult experiences.

1. Be aware of your own attitudes, reactions and feelings toward the situation.

Remember that you are the most important person in your child's life. Children often mirror their parent's attitudes and behaviors. As parents, we need to be aware of how we are feeling and adjusting to difficult times. Sometimes the best way to help our children is to take steps that help us manage stress positively in our own lives. This may mean talking and joining with other people or organizations for support (church, family, political groups) taking steps to stay physically and mentally healthy (sleep, diet, etc.) or simply remembering to stay calm when working with your children.

2. Give your children accurate information in language they can understand.

Keep it clear, simple, direct, and short. The goal is to provide children with a simple understanding of what's going on around them while not overwhelming them with details.

Be calm as you present the facts and information you have to your children. Also, remember it's "O.K." to say, "I don't know" or "Let's find out" when presented with hard to answer questions.

3. Reassure your children that they are safe.

Children often feel fear when someone close to them is injured, so it's important to emphasize the idea that they will continue to be safe at home and at school.

Continue to do things that comfort children: hugs, kissing, expressing love, taking time for fun, etc.

If necessary, review with your child standard safety issues. Reminding children that there are "things you already do to help keep safe" can be reassuring if this is done in a positive, routine manner.

4. Allow your children to express their feelings and ideas.

Ask your child what they think is happening, or how they feel about what they are hearing. Be a good listener and be prepared to be open, accepting, non-judgmental and understanding.

Teach your child how to express feelings and ideas appropriately. Feelings such as helplessness, anger, fear, general anxiety, etc. are o.k. and need to be "talked out" (ex: Dad, I feel..." or "Mom, I think..."). Afterwards, place an emphasis on listening to and respecting other's ideas and feelings. Teach your child how to express themselves while being respectful of other points of view. ("We can disagree and still be friends.")

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5. Help the child develop a plan of positive action.

Taking some positive action can help people feel constructive and "back in control". This might include:

- Writing a letter of support to the family.
- Discussing, talking and sharing ideas within constructive limits.
- Taking part in religious activities.
- Helping an individual or the community in ways that are non-related to the situation such as volunteering at a hospital.
- Expressing yourself through art projects and other expressive media.

These actions can be taken individually, as a family, or by joining groups in the community, even the smallest action can be significant in trying to "improve the part of the world that's in front of you".

6. Become aware of common signs of stress in your children.

Normal signs of distress in children may include:

Fears, problems sleeping, eating problems, increased aggressiveness or irritability, agitation, "clinginess", regression, becoming "overemotional", difficulty focusing or concentrating, increased variability in work performance, increased physical complaints, abnormal preoccupations, diminished interest in usual activities, pervasive concern about the well being of family members, withdrawal, and periods of crying.

Minor problems in these areas can often be handled within the family. In addition to the methods already described, the following will also help to reduce stress:

- Strengthen the family by spending more time together, especially during times when children are anxious.
- Maintain routine (bedtimes, chores, school attendance, recreational activities, etc.).
- Monitor your children's T.V. viewing.
- See to it that family members continue to exercise, get enough sleep, and eat healthy foods.

If these signs of distress become severe or prolonged, parents should seek the advice of a community professional such as a pediatrician, counselor, school psychologist, or child psychologist. In general, any prolonged or significant change in behavior, cognitive functioning, or personality might signal that the child may need help coping with some severe stress. Families who have experienced a recent family change (divorce, death, loss of job, etc.) particularly need to be aware of how their children are coping. Also, please let your children's teachers know if there is a problem so that they will be better able to help your children at school.

If you have questions, comments, or would like help getting a referral to a community helping agency, please feel free to contact the counselor, nurse, or school psychologist at your child's school.