



Helping Children with Stress and Anxiety

Definitions: Stress is the body's emotional and physical response to life's demands. Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

Sources of stress: pandemic; academics; routine; demands for time; life changes; peer-related issues; family stressors; etc.

How to support children in times of stress: Try to keep the home life stable when possible. Be accepting of temporary regressions. Watch yourself—as children can sense many of our feelings and thoughts. Normalize the behavior—as we all experience stress and often have moments of anxiety.

Ways to help: Help children identify their stress and help them to see patterns of when they feel anxious. Answer questions with age appropriate information. Ask them what has worked well in the past? Involve children in problem solving whenever possible.

Self-care activities: Encourage various self-care activities such as nutrition, movement, sleep; humor; music; talk; hobbies; helping others, etc.

Feelings: Everyone has feelings. Feelings are okay. It's what you do with the feeling that may or may not be okay. "Name it to tame it" Create a feeling vocabulary so children can talk about their stress/anxiety.

R.I.V.E.R.- Try using this useful communication technique if someone is angry or upset about something

Relationship- Establish a good relationship with the person/child by playing with them, talking to them and engaging in fun activities to keep a strong bond with them.

Identify emotions- Identify feelings, such as "You sound (name the feeling)" Ask or guess what happened to make them feel that way. Repeat back what they've just said, "You feel mad because _____."

Validate Feelings- It is important to validate the feeling expressed. "I can see why you would feel that way." "I understand why you might feel that way. Validation does not mean you agree with the feeling but rather agree that they have a right to feel that way.

Emotional Release- When the feelings have been released, the person/child often visibly relaxes, becomes calmer in his/her speech, and experiences emotional release.

Redirect to Problem Solving- It is only at this point that it is possible to redirect to solve the problem. Many people want to jump to problem-solving immediately with someone who is upset. Most of us want to be heard first. **The solution is often secondary to being heard and understood.**

Positive self-talk: Have children "check the evidence" by using "challenger" questions: "Is this really true?" "Are you sure this is really going to happen?" "Are you expecting the worst?" "Can you expect to be perfect in everything you do?" Use affirming thoughts - "I have been through this before." Use relaxing thoughts - "I am calm. Relax." Use realistic thoughts - "Ghosts aren't real."

Relaxation Exercises: Practice various relaxation exercises: breathing techniques (smell the flower, blow out the candle; finger tracing etc.) progressive muscle relaxation (tense a muscle group then relax); guided imagery (imagine yourself someplace pleasant), etc.

Stress-less Plan Steps: Make a list of what your child is worried about; of times and places of where the worries occur most frequently; of the thoughts and feelings that your child may have that trigger the worry; of the thoughts that your child can have to combat the worry; of activities that your child can do to combat the worry, fear, or anxiety.