

Skill-Building Opportunities

Stress Management

Question: I worry about my eight year old becoming too stressed. On top of the demands of his schoolwork, he is also involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities. I don't want him to feel "overscheduled." How can I help him learn to deal effectively with whatever stress he experiences?

The things that happen during daily life often provide the best opportunities to help promote life skills in your child. You can help your son manage stress by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring and trusting relationships with their mothers, fathers and other significant adults in their lives are less prone to stress. Even babies born prematurely are capable of managing some of their own stress with responsive support from adults. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children, says:

[S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who's] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Remember, your relationship with your child is the best stress buster.

It is important to help your child take on and manage challenges himself rather than try to protect him from stress or fix his problems. But that doesn't mean you have no role. In fact, your relationship with your child is essential. When your child knows that you are "there for him," he is likely to feel that he can handle hard things. You act as a stress buster for your child when you do things like:

- Acknowledge his feelings and actions, like: "You are working so hard to get your homework done before going to your extracurricular activities."
- Let your child know you are there for him. This means verbal support like: "I understand how hard it is to try and do so many things at once," as well as physical encouragement like hugs, pats on the back and positive facial expressions.

When children are faced with unclear situations, they search for information from others (namely, their parents) to guide what they should feel and do. This behavior is called "social referencing," and it begins in infancy. In an experiment with babies and their mothers, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley found that when a parent looks fearful, a baby is much less likely to try something new. If the parent smiles

or show that trying something new is okay, the child is more likely to venture out. As Campos describes his findings:

This particular study powerfully demonstrates the role of nonverbal communication in determining the child's behavior in an uncertain context.

Carol Dweck from Stanford University and her colleagues conducted a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks (like those found on intelligence tests) that became increasingly difficult. In this study, she found that the children in the study who “wilted” in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities— their intelligence—as something that can’t be changed. They believed that people are born smart or not. She called this view of the world a “fixed mindset.” In contrast, the students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop and change—they had a “growth mindset.”

Carol Dweck and her colleagues then found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics like: “You are so smart” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

2

Encourage your child by praising his efforts and strategies.

As you teach your child about Taking on Challenges, it is important to focus on the effort and strategies he is using instead of his personality or intelligence. For example, instead of saying to your child: “You are so good at school” or “You are so talented,” you can say things like: “I could tell how hard you were studying for your math test.” This type of acknowledgment reinforces your child’s problem-solving strategies, his coping skills and supports a “growth mindset.”

Studies have shown that parental stress spills over onto children. In a national survey, when children in the third through the twelfth grades were asked what they’d say if given one wish to change the way their mother’s or father’s work affected their lives, the largest proportion wished that their mothers and fathers would be less stressed, less tired.

3

Be a role model.

Your child is looking to you to show him how to manage stressful and challenging situations. You can model different behavior and strategies to help him learn to manage his challenges independently.

- Be intentional in finding ways to handle your own stress, so it is less likely to spill over to your son. Think about what helps you calm down. Is it exercise? Unplugging? Having time to talk with a friend? Try to build that into your life.
- Express your own feelings. You can tell your child directly that you had a bad day. Make sure to tell him that it isn’t his fault, because children will often blame themselves.

- Share with your child how you cope with stress like: “I need to take a break, just like you need to take a break when you are upset and can’t manage.”
- Remember to tell your child “the rest of the story” or how you resolved a stressful issue and coped with what was bothering you effectively. Use this as an opportunity to help your child learn from how you handle problems.

4

Use a problem-solving process with your child for helping him come up with solutions for managing his own stress.

This is the most important suggestion. When his schedule seems overwhelming or stressful to your child, sit down with him and help HIM problem solve about the problem and solutions. By using this problem-solving process with your son, you are helping him learn the skill of Taking on Challenges, without your fixing the problem.

- Ask your child to think about what is not working in his schedule. Write these problems down as a list so that he can focus on each of them.
- Ask him to come up with as many ideas as he can for solving each of these problems. Write down all of these ideas, without judging them.
- Then ask your son to think about what would work and what wouldn’t work about each of his possible solutions.
- Select one solution to try. Agree to talk again soon to think about how this solution is working.
- Talk in the near future about how his solution is working in reducing stress and making his life more manageable. If there are parts of the solution that aren’t working, go through the same process (described above) again and come up some new solutions to try.

5

Continue to give your child control in learning how to manage stress.

Your child is more likely to follow through on solutions when he has suggested the solutions himself. You can provide other tools to help him. For example, you can:

- Teach your child time management and organizational strategies, like using a planner or calendar.
- Encourage your child to use relaxation and breathing techniques.
- Help your child learn whom he can turn to for help, like teachers, relatives, friends and siblings. Taking on Challenges involves learning to ask others for help.