

## **Helping Your Kids Cope With Stress\***

### **Recognize the Cues**

Younger children — Watch for these changes in behavior

- acting irritable or moody
- withdrawing from activities they enjoy
- routinely expressing worries
- complaining more than usual about school
- crying
- displaying surprising fearful reactions
- clinging to a parent or teacher
- sleeping too much or too little
- eating too much or too little

Teenagers — Watch for these changes in behavior

Negative behavior is not always linked to excessive stress. Negative changes in behavior are almost always a clear indication that something is wrong.

- significantly avoiding parents
- abandoning long-time friendships for a new set of peers
- expressing excessive hostility toward family members
- Physical symptoms
  - sleeping too much or too little
  - eating too much or too little
- Interactions with others
- Listen / translate

Teenagers — Watch for these changes in behavior

- Express feelings of distress through other words such as “worried,” “confused,” “annoyed” and “angry.”
- saying negative things about themselves, others, or the world around them.

## What You Can Do

### Be Available

- Notice when your kids are most likely to talk, — at bedtime, before dinner, in the car — be fully available to just listen.
- Start the conversation by sharing what you have been thinking about, or what other kids may be thinking about, rather than beginning with a question.
- Find time each week for a one-on-one activity with *each* child
- Learn about your children's interests — for example, favorite music and activities — and show interest in them.
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### Listen Actively

- When your children are talking about concerns, stop whatever you are doing and listen.
- Express interest in what they are saying without being intrusive.
- Listen to their point of view, even if it’s difficult to hear.
- Let them complete their point before you respond.

- Repeat what you heard them say to ensure that you understand them correctly.
- Your children may test you by telling you a small part of what is bothering them.
  - Listen carefully to what they say
  - Encourage them to talk and they may share the rest of the story.

### **Respond Thoughtfully**

- Soften strong reactions — kids will tune you out if you appear angry or defensive.
- Express your opinion without minimizing theirs — acknowledge that it's OK to disagree.
- Resist arguing about who is right. Instead say, “I know you disagree with me, but this is what I think.”
- Focus on your child's feelings rather than your own during your conversation.
- Ask your children what they may want or need from you in a conversation, such as advice, help in dealing with feelings or assistance in solving a problem.

### **Take the Lead**

- Kids learn by watching their parents; they will follow your lead in how they deal with anger, solve problems, work through difficult feelings.
  - Help your kids to adopt healthy coping strategies by modeling positive behaviors.

- Engage the family in stress-reducing activities, such as taking a family walk, riding bikes or dancing together.
- Young children may express feeling of stress or worry in their play.
- Pay attention to themes in their conversations and activities
- Kids learn from their own choices. As long as the consequences are not dangerous to themselves or others, don't feel you have to step in each time.
- Shielding children from possible causes of stress or anxiety, such as unemployment, a parent's marital problems or an illness in the family, can worsen a child's anxiety because children commonly assume a worse case scenario.
- Help by providing age-appropriate information.

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