

Help Your Child Cope with Stress

This year may be unusually challenging for your family, which can make it difficult to cope from day to day. Our researchers have prepared some practical tips to help you and your child manage the effects of stress.

What to Know

Exposure to traumatic events can overwhelm your child's ability to cope, which may lead to child traumatic stress. This type of stress has negative impacts on children's social, behavioral, physical, and academic development.¹ Their sense of safety may be threatened and they can become easily triggered to act out or withdraw, which can directly impact all aspects of their lives, including their ability to learn.

What to Look For

Physical or psychological symptoms of stress can present themselves at home or at school—even in remote-learning settings. Here are a few symptoms you may notice.

Physical effects may include:

- Headaches or stomachaches
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty sleeping

Psychological effects may include:

- Self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors
- Decreased school engagement and achievement
- Depression or expressions of negative beliefs
- Increased reactivity to peers and teachers
- Increased anxiety, irritability, anger, or fear

How to Help Your Child Cope

Help Them Feel Safe

Start with your own safety. Just like putting on your oxygen mask before your child's in an in-flight emergency, you need to find ways to positively cope with your own stress so you can be a stable, calm presence for your child.

Build a Positive Relationship

Have open conversations with your child about their worries and fears, and tell them your own. Share ideas and talk about things that matter with your child, including topics that may feel uncertain, painful, scary, embarrassing, or difficult.

Be Adaptable and Understanding

Learn how your child responds to stressful situations and adapt your expectations of what they can or can't do. It's important to not put undue pressure on them when they're struggling to cope. Listen with an open mind, be non-judgmental and reassuring, and let them know it's okay to feel strong and negative emotions, such as feeling afraid, worried, or angry.

Communicate with Teachers

Take the time to meet with your child's teachers early in the school year and maintain a consistent routine for checking in. Talk with teachers about your child's workload or any classroom rules or expectations that are overwhelming or stressful for your child.

How to Regulate Emotions—Theirs and Yours

Lead by Example

The best way to help your child regulate their emotions is to practice and model your own emotion regulation.

- Pay attention to your feelings and reactions
- Take slow, deep breaths, and use positive self-talk
- Respond calmly to your child—this helps keep their feelings from escalating

Develop Coping Strategies

Developing your own successful coping strategies for dealing with uncertainty and stress can help your child do the same.

- Take good care of yourself so you can then take good care of them
- Lean on your support systems, eat well, and try to rest
- Have ongoing conversations about stressful situations that you and your child experience and the emotions they elicit
- Talk with friends, exercise, do some journaling, or work with a therapist

As you help your child manage stress, encourage them to talk about their strong emotions, validate those feelings, and help them come up with creative solutions for solving their problems. Understand that you don't have the answers to every question. Just be there for them and listen to them, even if those conversations are difficult.

References

1. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2020.) *About Child Trauma*. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>