

From the Health Clinic



Helping Children Handle Worry

Children do not have to pay bills, cook dinners, or manage carpools. But - just like adults - they have their share of daily demands and things that do not go smoothly. If frustrations and disappointments pile up, children can get stressed or worried.

It is natural for all children to worry at times, and because of personality and temperament differences, some may worry more than others. Luckily, parents can help children learn to manage stress and tackle everyday problems with ease. Children who can do that develop a sense of confidence and optimism that will help them master life's challenges, big and small.

What Do Children Worry About?

What children worry about is often related to the age and stage they are in.

Children and preteens typically worry about things like grades, tests, their changing bodies, fitting in with friends, that goal they missed at the soccer game, or whether they will make the team. They may feel stressed over social troubles like cliques, peer pressure, or whether they will be bullied, teased, or left out.

Because they are beginning to feel more a part of the larger world around them, preteens also may worry about world events or issues they hear about on the news or at school. Things like terrorism, war, pollution, global warming, endangered animals, and natural disasters can become a source of worry.

Helping Children Conquer Worry

To help your children manage what is worrying them:

Find out what is on their minds: Be available and take an interest in what is happening at school, on the team, and with your children's friends. Take casual opportunities to ask how it is going. As you listen to stories of the day's events, be sure to ask about what your children think and feel about what happened.

If your child seems to be worried about something, ask about it. Encourage kids to put what is bothering them into words. Ask for key details and listen. Sometimes just sharing the story with you can help lighten their load.

Show you care and understand. Being interested in your child's concerns shows they are important to you, too, and helps children feel supported and understood. Reassuring comments can help - but usually only after you have heard your child out. Say that you understand your child's feelings and the problem.

Guide children to solutions. You can help reduce worries by helping children learn to deal with challenging situations. When your child tells you about a problem, offer to help come up with a solution together. If your son is worried about an upcoming math test, for example, offering to help him study will lessen his concern about it.

In most situations, resist the urge to jump in and fix a problem for your child - instead, think it through and come up with possible solutions together. Problem - solve *with* children, rather than *for* them. By taking an active role, children learn how to tackle a problem on their own.

Keep things in perspective. Without minimizing a child's feelings, point out that many problems are temporary and solvable, and that there will be better days and other opportunities to try again. Teaching children to keep problems in perspective can lessen their worry and help build strength, resilience, and the optimism to try again. Remind your children that whatever happens, things will be OK.

So, for example, if your son is worried about whether he will get the lead in the school play, remind him that there is a play every season - if he does not get the part he wants this time, he'll have other opportunities. Acknowledge how important this is to him and let him know that regardless of the outcome, you are proud that he tried out and gave it his best shot.

Make a difference. Sometimes children worry about big stuff - like terrorism, war, or global warming - that they hear about at school or on the news. Parents can help by discussing these issues, offering accurate information, and correcting any misconceptions children might have. Try to reassure children by talking about what adults are doing to tackle the problem to keep them safe.

Be aware that your own reaction to global events affects children, too. If you express anger and stress about a world event that is beyond your control, children are likely to react that way too. But if you express your concern by taking a proactive approach to make a positive difference, your children will feel more optimistic and empowered to do the same.

So look for things you can do with your children to help everyone feel like you are making a positive difference. You cannot stop a war, for example, but your family can contribute to an organization that works for peace or helps children in war-torn countries. Or your family might perform community service to give your children the experience of volunteering.

Offer reassurance and comfort. Sometimes when children are worried, what they need most is a parent's reassurance and comfort. It might come in the form of a hug, some heartfelt words, or time spent together. It helps children to know that, whatever happens, parents will be there with love and support.

Sometimes children need parents to show them how to let go of worry rather than dwell on it. Know when it's time to move on, and help children shift gears. Lead the way by introducing a topic that is more upbeat or an activity that will create a lighter mood.

Highlight the positive. Ask your children what they enjoyed about their day, and listen when they tell you about what goes great for them or what they had fun doing. Give plenty of airtime to the good things that happen. Let them tell you what they think and feel about their successes, achievements, and positive experiences - and what they did to help things turn out so well.

Schedules are busy, but make sure there is time for your children to do little things they feel good doing. Daily doses of positive emotions and experiences - like enjoyment, gratitude, love, amusement, relaxation, fun, and interest - offset stress and help children do well.

Be a good role model. The most powerful lessons we teach children are the ones we demonstrate. Your response to your own worries, stress, and frustrations can go a long way toward teaching your children how to deal with everyday challenges. If you are rattled or angry when dealing with a to-do list that is too long, your children will learn that as the appropriate response to stress.

Instead, look on the bright side and voice optimistic thoughts about your own situations at least as often as you talk about what bothers or upsets you. Set a good example with your reactions to problems and setbacks. Responding with optimism and confidence teaches children that problems are temporary and tomorrow's another day. Bouncing back with a can-do attitude will help your children do the same.