

Kids can learn how to deal with stress

By Katie Hurley For The Washington Post

A young girl sits in my office, describing the “swishy” feeling that she gets in her stomach when she’s at school. It tends to happen at drop-off, just after lunch and as she watches the clock tick toward the end of the day. It happens so often that she knows she’s not actually sick, but it bothers her just the same. She can’t find a way to make it go away, and that makes it hard to concentrate.

The thing is, she actually is sick to her stomach. This 7-year-old is, quite literally, worried sick. Stress and anxiety trigger that “swishy” feeling in her stomach, and without adequate strategies to work through it, that feeling is there to stay.

By the time young worriers get to me, they’ve been silently fighting these feelings for quite some time. Although kids are under increased stress these days, most don’t really know what it means to feel stress. What they do know is that they have headaches, stomachaches, nightmares and an intense feeling of wanting to stay close to home.

According to the results of the Stress in America Survey released by the American Psychological Association, teens report higher levels of stress than adults during the school year. Findings from the survey show that 31 percent of teens report feeling overwhelmed by stress, 30 percent say stress makes them sad or depressed, and 36 percent have experienced fatigue because of stress. Yet nearly half of teens surveyed (42 percent) responded that they aren’t doing enough, or aren’t sure if they’re doing enough, to manage their stress.

If teens, who are fairly aware of the stress impacting their lives, struggle to find ways to manage, how can we expect younger children to cope?

When parents come to my office with their stressed-out little ones, we talk about goals first. What is it that they hope to gain from treatment? More often than not, parents want me to magically erase the stress from their child’s lives. They want it to go away. I sometimes wish I had a magic wand to serve just that purpose, but removing stress from the lives of our children isn’t a realistic goal.

Parents are always on a mission to protect their kids from the hard stuff, it seems. Bully-proof your kid. Stress-proof your kid. Intervene at school at the slightest sign of discomfort, which essentially boils down to school-proofing your child. Here’s the deal: Kids experience stress and discomfort and they will encounter difficult situations. It’s impossible to completely remove stress from the lives of our children. There isn’t a way to stress-proof our children. What we can do, though, is teach our kids to be stress-savvy.

When we take the time to educate our children about stress and teach them strategies to use when they feel anxious and overwhelmed, we not only normalize the complex emotions that sometimes confuse young children, but we teach them how to manage and cope with their stress.

Here’s how to do it:

complicated, but the best gift you can give your child is unconditional love. Kids will encounter stress and hard days; that's part of life. Knowing that you will listen and help them empowers them to work through their stress instead of stuffing it down and potentially making it worse.

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"The Happy Kid Handbook: How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World."

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