

Helping Kids Manage Stress

The beginning of the school year brings new friends, new things to learn and some structure, but starting school again can also bring stress. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that up to 25 percent of children meet the criteria for anxiety disorder at some point during childhood – a shocking statistic, and much higher than in past decades. Here are a few ways that parents can help kids manage stress.

WATCH FOR SIGNS OF STRESS. If your child is expressing many worries, having trouble sleeping, becoming too easily frustrated or reporting many symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches without an apparent physical cause, he or she might need help managing stress.

AVOID OVERSCHEDULING. Encourage your child to choose one (for elementary-aged children) or two (for older kids) extracurricular activities in which he or she is especially interested or talented, rather than signing up for every sport or activity. If your child has trouble choosing, consider alternating activities when seasons change or saving a different activity for the following year.

STAY IN COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS. Let them know when your child is feeling overwhelmed with the amount or type of homework. He or she might not be the only one, and this information is sometimes helpful for teachers in knowing when to adjust their expectations.

MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD IS GETTING ENOUGH REST. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends 9-12 hours of sleep for children ages 6-12, and 8-10 hours for teens. Many children are chronically sleep-deprived, making them much more susceptible to the effects of everyday stressors. Quality and consistency of sleep is also important. Sleep experts recommend a consistent routine that includes going to bed and

waking at the same time each day, avoiding caffeine and turning off all electronics at least an hour before bedtime.

COACH YOUR CHILD IN EFFECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS. Instead of telling children what to do, we can help them develop the skills to cope with problems by coaching them through simple steps. In my child-therapy practice, I use a technique called "1-2-3-Check." Step 1 is to ask yourself, "What is the problem?" Step 2 is to ask, "What are my choices?" Here, we brainstorm all possible courses of action. We narrow them down in Step 3, "Take the best action." After considering the likely consequences of each response, we make a choice. Step 4 is: "Check and see. How did it work?" If it worked well, we'll do the same thing next time. If not, we'll try something different.

Most importantly, LET YOUR CHILDREN KNOW THEY ARE NOT ALONE. Tell them they can always come to you for support when needed, and they can also take their needs to God. Pray with your children about problems and stressors they are facing, reminding them that Scripture says, "I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me" (Phil 4:13).