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How can I help my child cope with stress of school?

A parenting expert offers advice for helping kids navigate school related worries.

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STRESS is something we often deal with in adult life, but what do we do when our children face it at school? From playground dynamics and bullying, to academic pressures and keeping up with homework, there may be lots of tricky scenarios for youngsters to navigate.



However, there are simple and practical ways parents and carers can help children learn to cope.

How to tell if your child is stressed

According to Liat Hughes Joshi, author of five parenting books, there are signs you can look out for, starting with anything out of the ordinary for them. Look out for small changes in behaviour and patterns, such as not eating as much or eating more than normal, or if they're struggling to sleep and more noticeably tired than usual. These could all be indications that they are struggling with things.

Encourage them to open up

Ever asked your child what happened at school and heard "nothing" as their stock response?

Alicia Eaton, a Harley Street psychotherapist specialising in children's emotional wellbeing and behaviour change, points out that children don't always find it easy to open up – so be patient. Spending quality time with them can help encourage them talk about their emotions. "The more time you spend with them, the more likely they are to share their feelings and concern," Alicia says.

Approaching the topic

How you approach the conversation about stress at school with your child depends on their individual learning style and how they display emotion, advises Alicia.

"If you've got a visual child, it would be good for them to draw a picture, as it will be a way for them to express their emotions and then they can change those pictures into the posit-

ive,” she says.

“If you’ve got an auditory child, they like to listen and they like to hear words, they want explanations. Listening to soothing words is what will calm them down and listening to music.”

Channel their stress into creativity

Alicia warns against using negative phrases like “don’t worry” when discussing your child’s concerns with them – it may not have the desired effect. Instead, try setting up a worry box with them.

Your child can write down all their concerns onto pieces of paper, and then shut them in the box with a lid.

When events they were worried about have happened, they can take the worries out of the box and rip them up.

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Psychotherapist
Alicia Eaton

How to build positive coping techniques

Liat suggests creating a “menu of wellbeing” for them. This could be a chart on the fridge, or something for them to keep in their room.

On the menu will be various things your child likes doing, and can do when they feel worried or low.

It could be something simple like a cuddle from a parent, or time spent drawing or writing.

Liat adds: “Help them understand what works for them and then use those coping tactics for when they’re feeling stressed”

Often, children don’t understand that what’s going on is stress about something and they may complain of a tummy ache or that they feel sick. In this case, Alicia suggests encouraging a walk outside in the fresh air, or running them a warm bath.

Create a calm environment at home

One simple trick is to clear household clutter, Alicia says. “A tidy house gets rid of all the stress and panic before you go to school,” she adds. Organisation in the home will put a stop to worrying about where the lunchbox is, or finding their school bag and shoes in a mad rush before heading out the door.