

How to Help Raise Your Child in a Stressed Out World

Our families and children are stressed out after over two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and all the recent news of tragedy in our world. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently reported a 25% increase in anxiety and depression since the pandemic. Sadly, there are not enough mental health professionals to go around, and waiting lists can be up to a year. As a country, we need to do better for our next generation. As parents, mentors, and guardians, we need to do better in instilling resilience in our children.

The pandemic has caused social isolation, loneliness, fear of infection, illness, and death of family members, grief, and financial worries. Teens suffered the most with the isolation along with having to deal with their hormonal changes. Parents struggled with their own mental health during the crisis and some had little energy left to help their children. The closure of schools caused many children to suffer isolation, academic decline and to miss certain opportunities that would have been vital for their stages of development. Physical changes happen in the brain to respond to stress. The prefrontal cortex, or control tower, helps with attention, problem solving, impulsive control and emotional response. When over-stressed, a child's response to stress might be lack of attention to detail and poor grades, or they might become angry, defiant or resentful. Chronic stress can change the brain chemistry permanently and cause lifelong difficulty with coping skills, depression, anxiety and other health problems through suppression of the immune system.

What can we do as parents, teachers, and healthcare providers to help children to survive the stressors of life? We need to nurture a child to develop resilience. Resilience is the ability to overcome adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and significant sources of stress. Resilience should be modeled and taught from an early age and not only as a response to what is happening to them when their first crisis hits. How a child gets through adversity will shape who they become. When children are resilient, they are braver, more willing to try new things and more adaptable to unexpected outcomes or challenges. They see the world more positively and have less of a defeated attitude.

The good news is that the wiring in the brain can be changed as children learn to cope with adversity and how to handle their emotions.

Here are 10 suggestions to help develop resilience.

1. First and foremost, children have to have a relationship with someone who believes that they are important. The presence of a responsive adult can help reverse the physiologic changes activated by stress. This person could be a parent or grandparent, or even a teacher or coach.
2. Develop a cheerleading section for the child to let them know how great they are, for example, that Grandma thinks they were brave to try the new task.
3. Don't be tempted to do the task for them, let them learn to ask for help. Guide them in a task but avoid solving all their problems or doing it for them. Let them make mistakes when they are young.

4. Strengthen their prefrontal cortex by helping them to learn to make decisions. Establish routines in their day. Model healthy behavior by helping them see you solve problems, without over-reacting emotionally or blaming others. Help them with socialization skills, such as giving them opportunities to go to the park or play dates and encourage creative play. Play board games to help them build skills, such as impulse control by learning to take turns and planning ahead, which also helps with mental flexibility when a situation changes.

Encourage memory skill games. Teach them to learn how to make decisions by helping them make a case if they feel like they are right and you are wrong. It develops their executive functioning.

5. Exercise! Even 15 minutes of aerobic activity will provide some feel-good endorphin hormones that can relieve stress and help keep them fit.

6. Practice mindfulness. Teach mindfulness is to help them remain calm and focus, thus decreasing their anxiety. Mindfulness teaches self-calming skills. Taking five inhalations and then five exhalations allows us to be mindful and let any stress float away like bubbles. Another suggestion is to go for a walk, allowing them to feel and touch the nature around them, and to talk about what they sense — the wind in their hair or the sun on their face. For other suggestions visit:

<https://www.heysigmund.com/mindfulness-for-children-fun-effective-ways-to-strengthen-mind-body-spirit/>

7. Practice emotion coaching with your child or teen. Always empathize and validate the child's feelings. Putting a name on the feeling is helpful. Never attempt to calm a child with reason in the midst of a meltdown. Their prefrontal cortex is not working when they are having a temper tantrum. Punishing them for sad or angry feelings will not teach them to deal with their feelings. Once they are calm, discuss what they did wrong and ask them how they could do it differently next time. "Children who are coached emotionally have fewer emotional and behavior problems, including problems with anger, anxiety, and acting out."

Dictator-type parenting is linked to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. However, authoritative parenting, which emphasizes emotional support and reasoning with children, is linked with the best outcomes.

8. Encourage optimism. Rather than looking at the negative, reframe the child's view to see something positive. For example, they were unable to go outside due to rain, but now, we can have a tea party, watch a movie or play board games. Help the child to look for other opportunities. Avoid overuse of electronic devices.

9. Help children to face fears with support. Give them lots of information, such as what thunderstorms are if they are afraid of storms. Avoid overreacting, such as scooping them up if thunder strikes, which only reinforces that they have something to worry about. Use distractions, music or headphones during storms.

10. Nurture a growth mindset. People can change; a person who is a victim of bullying is not always a victim in life. Let them know that you know they can cope. Rather than solving their problems (as tempting as it is) help them to break it up into small pieces. Ask them: what do you think others might do in this situation?

Building resilience takes time, but life is full of unforeseen stressors, and if children develop the skills they need, they can develop a good self-esteem. As a parent, you will empower them so they can not only get through tough times but also use these times to look for hidden opportunities to improve themselves and others.

References:

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