

Thriving through Difficult Times with Hope and Optimism

After visiting with many students at various grade levels during the first few weeks of school, one thing is clear: Kids and teens have been stressed, and they still are finding it difficult to navigate the “new normal.” This long “temporary” pandemic situation is taking its toll – and no doubt parents feel that too. Everyone has had to make numerous adjustments in quick succession – school closing and distance learning in the spring, a long summer with few options for usual activities, and now a transition back to school with new protocols and procedures. It’s a recipe for confusion and stress in big and small ways.

Several parents have observed behavioral changes in their children, including regression to habits of earlier childhood, sudden clinginess, poor sleeping and eating habits, increased irritability, moodiness, anger, non-compliance, and anxieties manifesting in many ways.

But, there are ways to feel better. Child psychologist Mary Alvord studies trauma and resilience, and she cautions parents to be on the lookout for behavioral changes that affect day-to-day functioning. If major changes are noticed, look especially for how frequently and when they occur, and consult a therapist who can suggest effective interventions. Additionally, here are some ideas to try at home:

Model calm

Alvord states that the first step in helping your child is to look inward. That's because children and teens pick up stress levels in their parents. So the more calm a parent can be, the more they're reassuring their child, she says. Staying calm isn't always easy and often requires a conscious effort. Consider a mini break for yourself to reset stress levels.

Focus on what's working

Another way to help: Shift focus from your child's worrisome behavior, says Alvord. Instead pay attention to what's going right and reinforce it. Try saying things like, "you look really upset, but you talked about it, you stayed calm, and you asked what you needed." She says it is important to teach kids, even at a young age, to figure out what they want and to assert themselves.

Create soothing spaces

Some parents have found it effective to help their children create soothing spaces just for them, places they can go when they need to feel better. A cozy space where your child feels safe and can regroup is a healthy way of dealing with stress and anxiety. Remember treehouses? They served exactly this purpose.

Support kids' friendships

Connections to friends are important for kids' psychological development, Alvord says, especially for teens. "While we need to physically distance, we need to make sure we're all socially connected." says Alvord. There are ways for kids to maintain friendships even with all

the necessary precautions to avoid transmission. Keep encouraging social bonding and emotional connections.

Have open and honest conversations

When children are sad or upset, the best gift parents can give them is time, says psychiatrist Joshua Morganstein, who chairs a committee on the psychiatric dimensions of disaster for the American Psychiatric Association. "Sit with them and give them time, time to wait and listen to what they have to say." He says this lets the child know that they are "worth waiting for," and that you will try to understand what they're going through. And be honest, he says, when talking with your child no matter what their age. That might mean admitting you don't know the answer to a question about the pandemic, and offering to look it up together. This models the attitude you want them to develop as they grow older, he says.

Build a hopeful vision of the future

Being honest and direct is actually a way of teaching your child to feel hopeful, he says. "Hope isn't about pretending that everything's OK; it's about recognizing that things can be very, very difficult and that in the midst of all of that, we can still find ways to grow as individuals and as a family, and to strengthen our connection with each other and with the people we care about." Learning these things, he says can help "sustain a vision of a more hopeful future."