

Help your kids deal with stress and school



By Dan Naumovich

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The adage "the carefree days of youth" was conceived in retrospect. And while there is truth in the idealism, it isn't healthy to assume that children don't have a care in the world.

The reality is kids do feel pressure from any number of sources. What is often dismissed as laziness, selfishness or brattiness may be a response to intense or persistent stress.

An adult dealing with the many responsibilities of being a parent and earning a living might not be aware that, from a child's perspective, going to school, maintaining friendships and living up to expectations is every bit as stressful. Developing that awareness is one of the first steps toward helping children ease their stress.

Linda Castor is a registered nurse and a licensed clinical professional counselor who works at the Clocktower Therapy Center in Springfield, Ill. She said some of the warning signs of a child under stress are dropping grades, subtle changes in personality and a revolving cast of friends.

She said the first response to such signs is to encourage a child to open up and talk about what they are feeling.

"Above and beyond, be a good listener. You want them to be able to talk about their feelings," Castor said.

Part of the challenge for the parent is not responding in kind when a child angrily lashes out at them. Another challenge is recognizing when parental expectations are the cause of the stress.

"One of the main causes of stress for children is when their parents' expectations are too high. The high-expectation parent maybe didn't get what they wanted growing up, so they want to live through their kids," she said.

Parents must walk a fine line between encouraging their children to try new things that will challenge them and pushing them into uncomfortable or undesirable situations.

Participating in sports, for example, can be a rewarding experience with many positive social and health benefits. For some children, however, sports can be a source of embarrassment, or perhaps just boring.

"Parents need to look at themselves and say, 'Hey, is this really about me?'" Castor said.

Signs of stress

In addition to getting a child to open up, there are many things parents can do to alleviate or eliminate the causes of stress.

Providing children with a regular daily routine and enforcing rules consistently provides a structure of familiarity and comfort. Healthy eating and exercise also can help a child better cope mentally. Castor also recommends frequent neck and shoulder massages.

Depending on the child and the situation, a parent may want the services of a professional therapist or counselor. Signs that such assistance may be needed include frequent tantrums, harming oneself and either becoming withdrawn or uncharacteristically clingy.

Not all symptoms of stress are exhibited through a child's behavior. Physical ailments, often in the form of headaches or flu-like complaints, can also arise when a child is suffering from stress.

Castor recalls one young man whose chronic back pain was eventually diagnosed as a psychosomatic response. In such instances, therapists are careful that all possible medical causes have been ruled out before treating it as an emotional issue.

Keep in touch while letting go

One of the most trying times for a child is when they are no longer children but not quite settled into adulthood. When a young person leaves for college, it can be a trying experience both for the student who is on his or her own for the first time and the parent who can't be there to provide comfort.

Although there may be a physical distance, it is important to remain close via phone calls, emails and visits. If parents notice a change in their child's attitude or behavior, they should encourage him or her to seek out counseling services available on most campuses.

Valerie Gebhardt is the AOD (alcohol and other drug) prevention coordinator at the University

of Illinois Springfield in Illinois, where she works in the counseling center. During orientation at the start of the school year, the center tries to get the word out to parents that they will be there if their children start feeling pressure from academic demands or social situations.

"I really stress with the parents that they have already paid for our services with the student activity fee, so there is no reason why their student can't come to our office for support," Gebhardt said.

Gebhardt added one of the best ways for parents to help prepare their children for college is to ensure they have mastered some basic life skills. Things such as doing laundry, cooking meals, paying bills and budgeting time can become overwhelming if a student has never had to attend to these tasks before.

Parents should also encourage their children to become involved in extracurricular groups and organizations. Boredom is a major cause of substance abuse on campuses, and loneliness can lead to feelings of alienation. Becoming active in positive activities can help stave off negative influences and feelings.

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