

With the changing of the seasons, we begin to start talking to the children about the end of the school year and the start of camp. One class, with its teachers, classroom and classmates ends, and a new, perhaps unfamiliar, experience begins. As adults know, even positive life changes and joyous events can be stressful. Welcoming a new baby, purchasing a home, getting married, all of these are wonderful life changing events, but anyone who has experienced any one of them knows that they are not stress-free. Add to the fact that we have already been coping with anxiety, and or loss from COVID and many of us are grappling with the senseless destruction we are seeing in Ukraine. Much of our anxiety stems from a feeling of not being in control of a situation, be it personal or more global. Stress will always be a part of our lives; the question is what to do about it.

Children who learn to recognize and name their emotions are infinitely more qualified to deal with them in a positive and productive way. We often assume this skill will develop naturally; however, many children need a lot of practice to grow comfortable talking about how they feel, especially in the moment. The best way to give children that emotional education is by modeling talking about your own feelings. Talking about feelings sounds simple but can be quite difficult for many adults as well as children.

Using specific words to describe your own anger, frustration or sadness can better help children understand feelings. While parents may worry that this will teach their children to be afraid or concerned, using emotional language makes it okay to talk about feelings and leads to more positive coping. Let them see your facial expressions when you're feeling frustrated, sad or angry. Name the emotion that you are feeling and let children know how you are planning to cope. Obviously, the intention is not to burden children with adult problems, but to give them age-appropriate information and advice. I may tell a young child that I'm feeling sad because I miss a friend who lives far away. I tell them when I call her or send her a text, I feel closer to her and not as sad anymore. You can also use examples from books or videos. Ask your child how he or she thinks a character is feeling. Ask how they know; Is it something the character said, did, or simply how their face looked. Help your child brainstorm what that character might do and help build a tool kit that your child can draw upon when they encounter the inevitable setback.

Children are more likely to use feeling language in-the-moment if prompted to practice as often as possible. Instead of asking general questions, try asking specific feelings-oriented questions. When our child tells you that they were the class helper, instead of just replying "How fun!" Ask your child how it felt when they got to be the star that day. Was he or she excited, nervous, proud or all of the above?

It is equally important to talk about feelings of happiness as it is to talk about sadness or worry. As your child continues to practice, they will grow in their ability to use more complicated emotional words – such as frustration, pride, disappointment, and concern.

It is difficult to try not to fix all our children's problems. As soon as they say they're hurt or frustrated or sad, we want to make it all better. Instead, use these opportunities to help them recognize their feelings and learn to develop the coping strategies they will need to navigate the world.

Empowering children to say how they feel and reassuring them that it is okay to have these feelings, is one of the greatest gifts you can give your children to prepare them to successfully overcome the difficult situations we all encounter in our lives.

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