

Mental Well-Being

Coping With Common Challenges



Each day, children face challenges that have the potential to affect their mental well-being. They juggle busy schedules, tackle schoolwork, navigate friendships and deal with problems in life. The good news is that families can shape the way children respond to these challenges. Talking about and practicing healthy coping strategies at home goes a long way toward supporting mental well-being in children.

This booklet highlights common challenges and offers practical advice and activities families can use to address them.

Managing strong emotions

My child often has outbursts when frustrated or disappointed. How can I help my child find better ways to cope with these feelings?

It's not unusual for children to act out when they're experiencing strong feelings. However, you can help your child learn appropriate ways to handle powerful emotions. Here's how:

- **Teach your child to recognize feelings** before they spiral out of control. Point out physical signs of anger or frustration, like frowning, hot cheeks, tense muscles and fast breathing. When your child notices these clues, it's time to breathe deeply or choose a calming activity.
- **Stay calm and be understanding.** Keep in mind that your child will take emotional cues from you. When your child gets upset, speak softly. Acknowledge your child's feelings out loud, without trying to dismiss or change them. Simply saying "I know you're frustrated" (instead of "This is nothing to get frustrated about") may help your child settle down.
- **Tell your child what to expect** ahead of time, when possible. If the disappointment of having to leave the playground causes meltdowns, announce a five-minute warning. If your child throws a fit when you say *no* to candy at the store, give a heads-up before you shop: "You can pick out the fruit, but we're not buying candy today."



Coping with stress

My child seems really stressed out lately. What should I do?

First, help your child get to the root of what's causing the stress. Ask what makes your child feel happy and relaxed, and what makes your child feel tense and anxious. This lets your child vent, and you'll be in a better position to help when you understand what's going on. In general:

- **Make sure your child's schedule is balanced.** Children need quiet time and time for free play. If too many extracurricular activities are contributing to your child's stress, consider cutting back.
- **Brainstorm stress-relievers** like listening to music, riding a bike, coloring, etc. Suggest making a list—your child can refer to it and choose an activity when life gets stressful.
- **Shield your child from unnecessary worries.** Wait until your child is out of earshot to discuss adult problems, and limit your child's exposure to upsetting events in the news.

Developing a healthy self-image

My child often says "I can't do anything" and "No one likes me." How can I improve my child's self-image?

It's normal for kids' opinions of themselves to dip from time to time. This may happen more often as adolescence brings changes to your child's body and brain. Here are ways to provide a boost:

- **Foster a sense of belonging.** Feeling like a valued member of a family, school and community is important to a child's identity. Do things as a family, and spend time with extended family when possible. Encourage your child to get involved in school activities, and participate in community events together.
- **Let your child tackle challenges** and solve problems independently. Resist the temptation to edit your child's paper or fix a cake your child didn't frost perfectly.
- **Set realistic expectations.** When deciding whether an expectation is appropriate, consider your child's abilities and use the "Goldilocks rule": not too low or too high, but just right. Just-right expectations help children strive and succeed without feeling like they are bound to fail.

Building conflict resolution skills

My children argue a lot. How can I help them learn to resolve conflicts peacefully?

Sibling squabbles are the first conflicts many children face. While the tension is challenging for families, think of it as practice for “real life,” since effective conflict resolution skills are critical for your children’s well-being at school and in the future. To build these skills:

- **Let children resolve conflicts independently.** Try this strategy. Each child states their side without interruption. Then, they each propose a solution and discuss both. Finally, they agree on the best solution or compromise by combining the solutions.
- **Anticipate conflicts.** Before going into a situation that may cause arguments, have your children brainstorm ways to prevent conflict. For arguments about who will go first (in the shower, on the computer, etc.), they might flip a coin.
- **Role-play.** Encourage younger children to role-play conflicts using stuffed animals or puppets. Then they can have the toys act out solutions.

Adjusting to family changes

Our family has gone through a lot of difficult changes this year. What’s the best way to support my child?

Life changes—a new sibling, moving to a new community, a death—can be difficult for children to navigate. But there are things families can do to reduce the negative effects. You can:

- **Provide structure.** Children need consistency to feel secure—especially when other things in life are uncertain. Stick to household routines as closely as possible, and set aside regular one-on-one time your child can look forward to.
- **Partner with the school.** Inform the teacher and school counselor about the changes in your child’s life so they can address your child’s needs appropriately.
- **Communicate honestly with your child.** Express your unconditional love, and encourage your child to share feelings. Talk about how you have felt in similar situations, and explain healthy ways you coped with those feelings.

Dealing with academic struggles

Schoolwork is especially challenging this year, and it's taking an emotional toll on my child. What should I do?

The first step is to talk to your child's teacher. If your student is falling behind, work together to develop a plan for getting help. Students who struggle academically often lose motivation or feel bad about themselves. Here are ways to help combat the emotional toll on your child:

- **Focus on strengths.** Praise what your child does well, and foster a *growth mindset* in areas where your child needs to improve. A growth mindset helps children see themselves as learners—and problems as solvable. Instead of thinking “I’m not good at math” your child can think “I can practice and get better.”
- **Set your child up for success.** If reading is a struggle, ask a librarian about HiLo Books, which have age-appropriate plots at a low reading level. Graphic novels can also boost confidence in struggling readers.
- **Celebrate effort and progress.** Put the emphasis on learning rather than on grades or test scores. Say things like “Your spelling has come a long way” or “It sounds like you’ve learned a lot about rain forests—tell me more!”



Navigating friendships

My child has been friends with several kids since kindergarten, but they're drifting apart. Now in fourth grade, my child seems sad and lonely, and has expressed a longing to be popular. What should I do?

Peers become increasingly important to children as they get older. It's normal for friendships to change as your child grows and discovers new interests. Try these strategies:

- **Encourage your child to find the *right fit*** rather than focusing on *fitting in*. Explain that healthy friendships involve shared interests and values. Ask, "What do you look for in a friend?" or "Why do you want to be friends with those kids?"
- **Talk about your own friendships.** Explain that it's OK—and even healthy—to belong to different groups. You may have childhood friends, college friends, work friends and neighborhood friends.
- **Get your child involved in activities** that can lead to healthy friendships with kids who share similar interests, such as a book club, scouts, a youth group or a sports league.

Reacting to peer pressure

My child tends to go along with whatever friends suggest, even if it's against the rules. How can I help my child resist peer pressure?

Some peer pressure is harmless or even positive, like encouraging a friend to read a book series. But negative peer pressure can lead children to take risks or get in trouble. To help your child resist negative peer pressure:

- **Role-play imaginary situations.** Take turns asking each other to do something that could lead to problems, like having your team cheat during a board game. Your child can reply with a firm but pleasant "No, it's more fun to win for real" or suggest an alternative: "Let's work together to do better on our next turn."
- **Suggest spending time with other friends.** Explain that true friends want what is best for each other. If certain classmates are pressuring your child, it may be time to avoid them.
- **Talk to the teacher** or school counselor if peer pressure is a frequent problem for your child. The school wants to know about situations that affect students' well-being.

Dealing with bullying

My child was bullied in school. The problem was resolved, but I worry about the lasting mental health effects. What can I do?

Children who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety. But with the support of family and other trusted adults, your child can move past the experience—and even help other children who are bullied. Here’s how to help your child:

- **Talk about ways to stay safe.** Your child may fear being bullied again. Review safety strategies like staying near adults or groups of other kids. Also discuss what to do if your child is bullied, including saying “Stop” in a firm voice and walking away to find an adult or a classmate.
- **Recognize signs of a problem.** Children who are bullied may experience sadness and loneliness, problems with sleeping and eating and a loss of interest in favorite activities. If you notice any of these signs, contact the school counselor or your child’s doctor.
- **Encourage your child to help others.** If your child witnesses bullying, suggest alerting an adult right away. Your child can also give the child being targeted an “out” by inviting them to play or saying something like, “Hey, I want to show you something over here.” Helping others will give your child the satisfaction of having learned something from a difficult personal experience.



Achieving a healthy body image

My child is a little bigger than other kids this age and often mentions being “fat.” How can I help my child develop a healthy body image?

A healthy body image means feeling comfortable in your body and with your appearance. Family and societal attitudes toward weight, food and health have an impact on body image. To improve your child's body image:

- **Focus on health.** Emphasize health instead of weight, and praise accomplishments instead of appearance. Avoid making negative statements about your own or others' bodies. If you've been eating healthier lately, mention how great you feel or how much more energy you have rather than how many pounds you've lost.
- **Encourage a healthy attitude toward food.** Make nutritious eating habits a priority for the whole family. Model healthy eating. Family meals are an ideal time to set an example. Talk about how good the food tastes instead of commenting on your child's eating habits.
- **Talk about images in the media.** Children may compare themselves to people on TV, in magazines and on social media. Point out that many photos are edited to make people look a certain way. Also, explain that the way a person looks doesn't determine their worth.



Families play an important role in helping children cope with challenges that can affect mental well-being. When families use effective strategies to help children manage life's everyday ups and downs, as well as more serious challenges, they put their children on the path to success in school and in life.

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