



Taking Time
by
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Childhood Pressures

Kids rubbing their fingerprints off their fingers because they failed to "make" the gifted program, children in tears after being cut from the hockey team, youngsters bed wetting or biting the new baby. Is this a picture of childhood happiness?

What about parents who hire special tutors when their sons or daughters are already achieving average academic scores, or parents that verbally attack one another at sporting events? What pressures are adults putting on children unnecessarily?

Child experts are observing an increased level of stress and tension in children. Stressed children may revert to less mature behaviors. They may be hostile toward people who wish to comfort them. Their sleeping, eating, and toilet patterns may change. They may forcefully intrude on others' play, or they may withdraw from gatherings or groups.

Do a quick self-check. Do I contribute to my child's stress? Does my message discount my child's feelings? Do I say things like, "You're acting like a baby about this" or, "It's not worth crying about"? Do I keep correcting my child's work until it is "perfect" in an attempt to help them succeed? Or, can I honestly say, "I love my child just the way he/she is"? Do I tell her and show my love and acceptance on a regular basis?

Researchers and family life educators have many suggestions for adults about helping children deal with stress. A few that you may want to consider are:

Be available to talk and listen to the child. Being available and noticing a child's stress is more important than making the stress go away. I like the phrase, "Sit

silently with a child who sits alone." The balance in the conversation should always be with the adult listening more than talking. Encourage the child to put his anger or sadness into words. Avoid using phrases like, "Oh, that's not so bad. You'll have another chance." Say instead, "Oh, you must feel very sad. I know you were excited about ..."

Provide private, safe space for the child. Sometimes kids don't want to talk. Make sure every person has some safe, cozy place to escape to — a place all her own. This may be a stack of pillows in the corner, a hide-out in the den, a desk, or even a bedroom. Respect the alone time that the child needs. Keep home routines predictable and supportive.

Regularly use spoken and non-verbal messages to boost a child's self-esteem. Try saying the following statements to your children: "I love you even when we disagree." "You can find a way of doing things that works for you." "My love is always with you. I trust you to ask for my support." "All your feelings are okay with me." Describe very clearly what you like about your child or his accomplishments. For example, "The rock collection that you put together is really organized. You spent a lot of time making it that way."

Use humor to defuse tension and reframe thinking about a negative situation. Fill your home with laughter. Allow tears and anger. Let those feelings come out, but after they do, fill up the space with fun and silliness. Laugh at your own mistakes. Laugh at life. Laugh with each other.

Encourage daily active play or exercise outdoors. Being in the fresh air and working out

physical adrenaline can enhance a person's mood, vent some frustration, and provide uninterrupted thinking time. Swimming is a great, soothing sport. Taking a shower or bath can also be quite therapeutic for people of all ages.

Encourage self-expression. Make sure you have lots of paints, clays, art materials, paper, and journals. When your child doesn't want to talk, these are great ways for them to express their feelings. Even mixing cookie dough or kneading bread can be a good outlet.

Allow, even welcome, mistakes. The less a child thinks he has to be perfect and the more a child is encouraged to experiment and try again, the better she will be in the long run. Dr. Christine Todd, family life expert, recalls that Mr. Goodyear tried to make rubber hundreds of times before succeeding. If he hadn't persevered, we'd still be riding on metal wheels.

She also cites research that says children who are good in math are also children who make mistakes. Fortunately, they aren't sidetracked by the mistakes. Rather they keep looking for solutions to the problem at hand.

Do you keep enough materials on hand (or allow enough time) so that if a mistake is made, a child can try again? Around eight or nine years of age children become acutely aware of their shortcomings. Practice by saying things like, "Oh well, it didn't turn out. I know you're disappointed. You're welcome to try again sometime."

Seek out activities at home, school, and in the community that rely on cooperation. Many times a child's stress comes from "coming up short" in competitive situations. Look for situations that thrive on teamwork and where everyone has a chance to contribute and succeed.

Demonstrate positive coping skills and self-control as you deal with your own disappointments. Your own examples and sharing how you dealt with rejection or stresses may be the best solution. Laugh at your own mistakes. Cry when you're sad. Ask for a hug. Let your children see you trying again, apologizing, and going to "Plan B" when "Plan A" falls through.



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