

The Key to Coping with Stress: Finishing Feelings

Chris Kaepfner, Ph.D.

One thing adults and children have in common is that both have to cope with stress. Fear, conflict, uncertainty, and loss generate stress whether you're a mom with three children or a kid in grade school. The specific causes differ but the underlying experience of stress is the same. The good news: Children are amazingly resilient. They often find ways to manage their stress. Even in the most difficult circumstances, many children find one or two trusted adults who understand, even though they cannot change the problem itself.

In both children and adults, stress initiates a complex series of interactions in the brain. These interactions can lead to physical problems associated with stress (e.g., difficulty sleeping, stomach aches, poorer resistance to illness). Learning to cope with stress is a key to helping your body stay healthy.

Children often face obstacles that prevent them from coping with stress in healthy ways. They may lack the language and personal insight to label their own emotions. They may withdraw from others because they have trouble interacting with others to process emotion. They may "act out" because they cannot find the words. They might feel uncomfortable sharing emotions. Over time, poor coping can lead to a number of biological, personal, and social problems.

However, talking about emotions in the context of an understanding relationship is healing. Feeling understood is the engine of healing. It generates energy to pursue other coping strategies. We often know what to do but lack the motivation to do it. Empathy and love can remove the obstacles, leaving us recharged, refreshed, and ready to try something new.

Parents and caregivers can equip children with the resources necessary to cope with stress. The key is acknowledgement. An acknowledgement is a simple and neutral statement of the fact and the feeling. "You lost your game and you look really mad."

The fact is the situation or the event that led to the feeling. The feeling is the emotion that results. An acknowledgment helps to ensure that the caregiver understands what happened and how the child feels. An acknowledgement should occur before setting any limits or providing any reassurance. (e.g., "Something is making it hard for you right now" or "My guess is that when Joey took your toy it hurt your feelings, is that close?")

Sounds easy, right? Well, the next step is even harder: You have to shut up. In all seriousness, this is a crucial factor. By remaining silent, we allow the child to react to our acknowledgement. They may disagree, change the words, explain further, or just nod in agreement. As they do this, they are converting stress into words in the context of a supportive and caring relationship. This will help the child to finish their feelings before any new information is given. This is the first step of healthy coping!

Using acknowledgments with children sounds easy. However, it can be a tricky habit to develop. This is especially true if you tend to provide only reassurance ("It's okay"), reinterpretation ("It's no big deal"), or solutions ("Next time just do this"). All these are good ideas but can cause problems over the long haul. The child needs to learn to label and accept feelings and, when things are calm, to generate their own solutions. During an acknowledgment, parents work to maintain a soothing emotional

stance. They utilize simple fact and feeling statements to ensure that the nature and acceptability of the feeling are acknowledged to the child's satisfaction.

Over time, this process will develop the child's emotional vocabulary. The child will also feel more comfortable discussing feelings. Parents will also learn to stay calm when the child is not, a key to improved emotional processing over time. When you realize that simple acknowledgement works, you can relax. This conveys a deep message of reassurance to your child.

Once feelings are fully understood and acknowledged by the parent, the child is able label a broader range of feelings (happiness, anger, sadness, jealousy, anxiety excitement). Then the child is often ready to accept new information, engage in problem solving, and understand reassurance and/or limits. As children are able to express the full intensity of their feelings without distraction or topic changes, they are better prepared to face challenges and develop stronger interpersonal relationships.

Armed with these skills, a child's natural resiliency grows and will generalize to other stressful situations. They will still encounter trouble. But they will have the insight to recognize their feelings, the language to describe their experience, and the loving connection with a good listener. Over the long-term, these and other parenting techniques will help children to mature, that is, to learn from their negative emotional experiences as opposed to simply repeating them.

Chris Kaepner is a clinical psychologist who works with children, adults and families. He can be reached at [513-313-7661](tel:513-313-7661) or by emailing chris@chriskaepner.com.