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October 10, 2008

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Coping skills should be developed early

The new school year, with all its excitement and promise, is now well underway. While school should be perceived as a positive experience, providing opportunities to learn and grow, to bond with old friends and make new ones, many kids find school overwhelmingly stressful. What can parents and professionals do to prevent, or at least minimize, these debilitating feelings?

Discomfort, fear, and anxiety are normal feelings. Learning to cope is an important developmental task that children can tackle effectively, usually with adult guidance and support. Fears are common. They emerge and diminish throughout childhood. As most children mature, they overcome fears of the dark, thunder and monsters, and block out daily media reminders of personal tragedies, disasters and terrorism.

Some children encounter special challenges: divorce, a death in the family, an unexpected move to a new neighborhood or community, or a transition to a new school. While many kids develop strategies to compensate for the worries these issues produce, up to 5 percent of children develop anxiety disorders serious enough to interfere with normal function. Treatment is much more effective if begun early, but is dependent upon the early recognition of an anxiety disorder.

How well do you know your child? Does he refuse to go to school, complaining of a bellyache or headache, or display changes in sleep patterns or behavior? Has he lost interest in school, friends or after-school activities? Is your child terrified of failing academically or athletically? Has a bully targeted your child and threatened to, or perhaps has, physically hurt him? Since children often have difficulty discussing their concerns, fears and worries, parents may only learn of their child's stresses and anxieties by carefully monitoring their actions and activities.

How can a parent help? Initially, taking stock of your own anxieties and stresses is essential, since parental worries can greatly impact the thoughts of a child. Helping children put their fears in perspective, manage time and prioritize expectations, may also reduce anxieties. Expanding opportunities for discussion and regulating overwhelming schedules can help as well. Conversational opportunities as simple as the family's gathering around a dinner table a few times a week (with the TV off), allow families to learn about each other's activities, successes and failures. Participating in family activities, including doing a puzzle, playing a game or taking on a joint project, can often redirect unhealthy thoughts, build resiliency and strengthen relationships.

Although many parents find effectively communicating with children to be quite challenging, following these general guidelines when talking to your child could help:

- Be a good listener. Don't dominate the conversation.
- Be consistent and predictable. Don't avoid difficult topics or discipline randomly.
- Acknowledge that worries and fears are common and that most are likely to diminish with time.
- Be understanding and supportive. Don't put down or ridicule fears and anxieties.
- Encourage problem-solving strategies. Don't pressure your child to be bold and fearless.
- If your child's fears and worries escalate and become an overwhelming focus of your parental concern, do not hesitate to contact your pediatrician for support and additional information.

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