

Helping your child deal with stress and build resilience: information for families

Childhood can be a time without cares and problems, but more and more children are affected by stress and worry – about everyday things as well as when there are bigger problems world-wide such as the coronavirus outbreak. As a parent, you are ideally placed to help your child deal with stress and worry – these techniques also work for adults so you can all use them as a family – as well as helping them become resilient and better able to cope when things don't go to plan. This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) contains lots of suggestions about how to help your child from our Play team, a team of experts who have many years' experience of working with children, young people and families.

What is does resilience mean?

'Reacting to change and dealing with it in a positive and calm way'

We all have some level of resilience, even children, but there are ways we can all become more resilient so we can deal with life's challenges.

Feelings are normal

If your child is unhappy or anxious, it can be tempting to swoop in to take away the source of their worry or shield them from it in some way. You can help your child by showing them ways to deal with the challenges they face.

Identifying and dealing with feelings

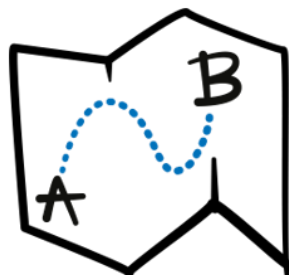
Start by asking your child to describe what they are feeling and where these feelings in their body – this helps them to be as accurate as possible.

For instance, they may be sad because their pet has died, anxious about what will happen to their pet after death, and lonely because they no longer have their pet around as a playmate. They might have butterflies in their tummy or feel like their arms are shaky.

Helping your child develop the skills, either verbally or using resources and props to share and describe their feelings will be very helpful as they grow older.

Talking about feelings can also reduce the physical behaviour that sometimes accompanies stress and worries.

Instead of words, try using a variety of emoji symbols instead if your child prefers. Remember to include some 'happy' ones too – it is just as important to acknowledge when things are going well and we feel content.



Listen to what your child is saying – give them as much time as they need and perhaps reinforce that their feelings are normal and you understand why they might feel like that.

Some children will be reluctant to talk about their feelings – don't force the issue but just remind them that you are there for them and be ready to listen when they are ready to talk.

Encouraging problem-solving

Rather than trying to find your own way of taking away the source of your child's stress and worry, work together to find a way around it.

For instance, even if our pet's body has gone, we can still remember how much we loved them and how happy they made us feel – try to help your child find a way of remembering their pet, perhaps by keeping a nice photo of them or doing a painting.

You could help your child make a plan for dealing with their stress and worry – if it is a big topic, help them to break it down into chunks so they can deal with it bit by bit.

You could design a planner together, or decorate a notebook. This is a calm and creative activity, and it means that when feelings of worry arise, you can use colours and images to help your child explore these feelings.

Make up a song or poem or have an activity ready to go as an outlet.

The Me First Resource Hub (details at the end) has a range of downloadable resources to explore feelings and to make sense of the world.

Once your child has a plan, don't dwell on their stress and worry – suggest a fun activity for all of you.

Learning to relax

We all need a way of helping our body and mind to relax. There are lots of options so try various things with your child to see what suits them.

For instance, play some quiet, calm music and help them to control their breathing so that they relax. There may be a particular story or film that they find distracting.

There are lots of resources and apps that are available – have a look at the list at the end of this information sheet.

Dealing with things outside our control

There is so much happening in the world all the time, much of it reported in detail on the television, online and in newspapers. This can evoke feelings and children can become unsettled when listening to conversations.

It is never a good idea to shield your child entirely from the world outside – better that they hear a balanced view from you rather than a scare story from someone else.

As a parent, you can help reassure your child that you will do everything in your power to keep them safe. Answer their questions honestly and if you don't know the answer, say so and see if you can find out.

Pitching things at the right level

How old your child is and how emotionally mature they are will influence how you answer their questions and give them information. Be guided by the words they use when asking questions or talking about what has happened.

Try to give a balanced view of what happened, without apportioning blame. It is important that your child is aware that some disasters just happen – it is rarely due to any one person's actions, there are lots of factors coming together.



Managing your reaction

How your child deals with stress and worry is influenced by how their parents, carers, and other people react. Try to remember to stay calm, and to suggest that you and your child can work through any worries together in a balanced way.

If your child continues to want to talk about what is worrying them, don't dismiss their fears – offer

them reassurance and practical ways you are keeping them safe.

Getting professional help

If your child shows any changes in their behaviour or you are worried that you can't help, ask for support from your family doctor (GP) in the first instance. They will be able to talk to you about sources of support in your local area and how to access them.

Further information and support

At GOSH, **psychosocial teams** are groups of highly trained professionals, including social workers, family support workers, family therapy and clinical psychologists, with expertise in caring for children, young people and families in hospital. All wards and departments can get in touch with the psychosocial service.

The **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (Pals)** team can give you confidential advice and support about any issues that crop up while you are visiting or staying at GOSH. Drop into the office in main reception, call them on 020 7829 7862 or email pals@gosh.nhs.uk

The **Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care** team offer spiritual, religious and pastoral care to staff, families, and children of all faiths or none. They visit the wards regularly and also provide a 24-hour on-call service every day of the year. Visit the Chaplaincy Office by St Christopher's Chapel, ask a member of the ward team to contact them or email GOSH.Chaplaincy@gosh.nhs.uk

MeFirst resource hub at www.mefirst.org.uk/resources/

Young Minds – support for children and young people's mental health at www.youngminds.org.uk

Calm app – details at www.calm.com

Headspace for kids app – details at www.headspace.com/meditation/kids

