ON THE EDGE OF … *Managing Stress*

Strategies to Help Your Child Manage Stress

Today's children are faced with many challenges and options. Along with that, comes stress. Stress can originate by the child themselves, (choosing to try out for a sports team, the school play, or their first sleepover) externally set off by others or events outside their control (starting the new school year, a new sibling, physical body changes), situations at home, (parental relationship problems, blended families, illness in the family), or maybe school issues (peer conflicts, school workload, establishing friendships).

Stress manifests in ways that include physical, emotional, social or behavioral disorders. What can a parent do to teach their child how to manage stress?

1. **Teach through your behaviors.** First and foremost, know **YOU are your child's key role model**. Demonstrate your own healthy coping skills. The younger the child, the more you can explain your choices and why. As they become older **your actions speak louder.** Here are some Do's and Don'ts.

   Do's:
   - Notice your own languaging you use when you have had a stressful day.
   - Notice how you choose to spend free time on weekends or vacations.
   - Notice what "speed" you are running at when it's your one-on-one time with your child. Is it rushed? disorganized? multitasking? OR… Is it calm, fun, and focused?

   Don'ts:
   - Don't multitask when consoling or helping your child cope with stress.
   - Don't wait until middle or high school to start talking to your child. Start now.
   - Don't hover. A coined term you may have heard is *helicopter* parent, one who hovers. They swoop in to rescue their child from making their own mistakes or having any real freedom to mess up. But here's the thing… they need this freedom or they won't be able to thrive now or later in their life.

2. **Teach them to prioritize.**
   Your calendar reflects your family values and priorities. What do you notice?
   a. Maybe you don't have a calendar at all? And how's that working? Could it be why there's so much miscommunication and lack of coordination amongst family members? If so, then time to get one and start using it.
   b. Maybe that calendar is so full week-to-week there's no room to write another item. And you're asking yourself, "Why are we always so stressed? Why don't we ever have time to do nothing?"
   c. What does your family value? Is it church, volunteering, or physical activity? Together, discuss and prioritize family values and your choices of activities that support them.

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3. **Teach them that sometimes "less is more".** Take a look at that family calendar again. Ask yourself who's driving the level and amount of activities? If it is your child, and you feel it's overloaded, then it is up to you to scale back. How do you know it's overloaded? If your child is showing signs s/he is always tired, grades are falling, attitude is becoming more negative than usual, or s/he is starting to complain of some physical ailments like headaches, stomachaches, lethargy, etc. then it's time for you to step in and manage their schedule.

   On the other hand, if it's your intent on signing your child up simply to "keep up with the Jones', then be aware that when your child is stressed, at some level s/he is going to disconnect from the enjoyment of the activity.

4. **Teach them how to communicate their feelings.** Download emotions at: http://www.comet-cartoons.com/smileyFeelings.php. Use this as a fun tool to teach your child the diverse feelings they may have. Make a game of it. For instance, ask them to show you a "disappointed" face or a "hurt" face. Help them discern the distinctions. The more they can describe and show you, the better equipped they will be at expressing themselves rather than expressing them inappropriately or through harmful behaviors.

   ASK and then LISTEN. Do not put words into their mouth. Ask open-ended questions that allow your child to express him or herself. Let there be some silent space to collect their thoughts. Just like many adults, it may not be that your child is asking for you to fix things. Rather, what they need is for us to listen, and to craft the questions that will allow them to express their thoughts out loud.

5. **Teach them how to organize and manage their time.** Where else will they learn this if you don't teach them?
   a. Use a calendar. Write in all the activities for each child. You may be surprised to see how overbooked your family schedule is.
   b. Record details for each activity. Besides actual games or recitals, mark practices, related events, equipment purchases and carpooling duties for you, etc.)
   c. Teach your children how to start caring for themselves. That includes chores for the family (feeding pets, taking garbage out, keeping their rooms tidied) and self-care responsibilities (packing up their school backpack the night before, brushing their teeth, making their own bed).

6. **Teach them healthy stress-relieving behaviors**. Take them out for a walk, run, or throw a football together. Help them choose activities that relieve stress through healthy physical means. Or if they're the artistic type, sit with them and suggest he draw out what he's feeling. If your child enjoys reading, then sit with her and read a favorite book. Avoid video games, watching TV, or feeding them comfort food (unless they are really hungry).

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As parents, we all strive to raise happy and healthy children. Trusting and believing they can take care of themselves and contribute to your family is priceless. There's no magic that will take away their stresses. It is our responsibility as parents to teach our children the coping skills that will give them a sense of confidence, resiliency, and self-esteem. The strategies above will teach them.

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