



*Educating parents.  
Enriching families.*

## HELPING YOUR FAMILY COPE WITH ANXIETY AND STRESS

After a tragedy like today's school shooting, parents are frequently faced with the dual challenges of having to manage their own stresses and anxieties while at the same time trying to do their best for their children.

As we support our children, we must not forget to get the support that we need, too. We hope that you will find the following information and tips useful to you, not just in the immediate days ahead, but also throughout your parenting life. Don't expect to eliminate all stress and anxiety from your life, it's not possible and such an expectation will only increase your anxieties.

**Your own behavior:** Model for your children healthy ways to react to stress. Maintain an optimistic and positive outlook. Consciously focus on taking care of yourself and your family. Don't isolate yourselves; keep up your social connections. Make sure you include humor in your life; engage in playful activities and listen to favorite comedians or watch comedies. Don't neglect physical activity. Learn and practice relaxation and calming techniques.

Parents play a powerful role with their children in stressful times. There are things that we do that can help children handle stress better, as well as things that may contribute to the child's distress. It is helpful to children when adults are interested in them, respectful, and appropriately affectionate. Parents should be supportive even when correcting their children. It is NOT helpful to children when they experience their parents as being demanding, controlling, or critical of the child or other adults. Children who feel that their parents are inadequate or out of control have increased anxiety. Likewise, parents who are overprotective or disengaged from their children add to their children's stress levels.

**Move children towards helping others:** Shift the focus from children's natural anxiety towards what they can do for others. When they are working to help others, their own worries diminish in importance. It is empowering to children when their parents both see them as being able to contribute and provide them with opportunities for contribution. Altruism can be related to the current situation or involve doing something for the family, school or community.

**Limit media exposure:** Carefully consider whether children should be watching the news coverage, as it may contain unsettling footage. This can be very

frightening to young children. Older children are capable of understanding what is in the news and even following it closely. However, be careful that they don't become too preoccupied with it. If so, a "news watching allowance" might be in order. Don't forget that they are still children. If you want to keep up with the news, consider using earphones, or catch the evening wrap-up when the children have gone to bed.

**Be available:** Your children need you more than usual now, be sure to set aside time for them. Be flexible and allow time to address situations and concerns as they arise. Be sure to be especially loving and affectionate at these times. Remember to touch children in a warm, loving and appropriate ways. Hugs, caresses, back rubs, or brushing hair are deeply calming and reassuring to children who may be feeling unsettled but unsatisfied by all the talking.

Plan and carry out family-based activities that will calm the children, such as cooking and eating together, or offering warm baths with bubbles. When anxiety is running high, encourage children to use art (drawing, clay modeling, collage) to express their emotions. Older children may want to draw or journal their feelings.

**Communicate:** Remember that children are good observers but poor interpreters. They take in everything they see, but interpret their observations based on their own experiences and knowledge. It's up to parents to interpret what is happening for their children. Respectfully clarify their misunderstandings and correct their misconceptions. Present information in honest, age appropriate ways. Keep them talking about what they are hearing and seeing and - *don't forget* - feeling. Listen closely to fears and concerns, respect what they have to say. Don't assume that silence means lack of interest, but also don't force the discussion if the child is not receptive. If children are feeling anxious, ask them what the family could do to help them feel more secure. It is always helpful to do something, it makes one feel more powerful. Talk with them about how children can support each other.

**Maintain routine:** Keep to the daily routine as much as possible. Don't let the natural anxiety of this situation run your life. Use family meetings to discuss concerns, support each other and plan how to help others. Schedule things for the family to do together. This could mean family fun or family tasks, such as cooking.

**Observe your child:** Watch for symptoms of heightened anxiety such as those listed below. This can happen to people of all ages, but children need special care to help them through it. Pay special attention at bedtimes. Bedtimes need to be reassuring, and parents should consider an increase in transition time, story

telling and book reading to get the nighttime off to a good start. Secondary reactions may emerge such as fear of leaving the house or going to school. Use reflective listening to talk them out in advance.

Anxiety and stress may trigger acting-out. Discriminate between misbehaviors resulting from anxiety or stress as opposed to those that come from the usual mistaken goals, and tailor your response accordingly.

Remember that you are training your children in the life skills of coping with frightening world events—first, last and always: ENCOURAGE!

## **Anxiety and Stress Symptoms and Signs**

Behaviors that are new or magnified MAY be signs of anxiety or stress, but don't ignore other possible explanations. The symptoms and signs occur across age groups, but tend to be found in the ages as specified:

### **In Young Children**

- Crying
- Whining
- Clinging, fear of separation
- Regression, such as bed wetting

### **In School Age Children**

- Stomach aches or leg pains
- Irritability
- Inattention
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Withdrawal
- School refusal or decline in school performance
- Distracted or forgetful
- Uncooperative or disruptive
- Regression
- Difficulty in carrying on the regular "routine"
- Depression

### **In Tweens and Teens**

- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Disrespectful behavior
- Anger outbursts
- Avoidance behaviors
- Lack of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Withdrawal or isolation

- Depression
- School refusal or decline in school performance
- Guilt feelings or revenge
- Anti-social behavior
- Substance abuse
- Difficulty in carrying on the regular "routine"

### **In Adults and Teenagers**

- A constant state of urgency
- A desire to escape—to your room, workplace, away
- Underlying tension—irritability, muscle tension, explosions, tears
- A pervasive sense of guilt
- Loss of trust