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Tips for Parents: Worry, Stress, and Depression

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In these notes from his seminar, Dr. Amend gives important, straight-to-the-point tips for easing and sometimes avoiding your child's worrisome episodes. Amend states that strengthening the child's ability to handle stress and frustration is a gradual process and naturally requires the child to experience frustration along the way.

- Remember that everything, even positive events, can cause stress, and managing stress level helps an individual function effectively. When a child is stressed or worried, communicate acceptance by reflecting feelings (e.g., "Sounds like you're pretty worried about..."). Avoid trying to talk a child into feeling differently—feelings are not right or wrong. Provide support, be involved, and communicate. These are keys to healthy relationships with children, and a strong relationship will help moderate negative feelings and events.
- Strengthening the ability to handle stress and frustration is a gradual process and requires the child to experience frustration and stress along the way. They need to learn skills and practice them. You can't get better at something if you never have opportunities to practice. Use available books, such as *Fighting Invisible Tigers*, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, *The Optimistic Child*, and *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*, to help children learn necessary skills.
- Help your gifted child identify negative thoughts and recognize "thinking errors" and their negative consequences on mood and behavior. Understanding thinking errors, like *making a mountain out of a mole hill* or *all-or-none thinking*, gives awareness first and then ways to manage.
- Look at how one explains the reasons for events—successes or failures—and how that affects mood. Look for evidence to support or refute the belief or view. For example, when the child says, "I am stupid," talk about the evidence for such a statement to help the child understand the negative impact on them.
- Keep in mind that watching TV or video games (which some children say is relaxing) is often not. The idea of relaxing involves decreasing the amount of information coming in, and TV increases it. Decrease the amount of stimuli coming in to decrease the overall stress level. Try relaxation techniques as a concrete way to decrease stress.
- Help your child develop some feelings of control over the worry by being proactive and participating in local causes or creating new ones. For example, is your child concerned about homelessness? Make arrangements to volunteer at a shelter if she's old enough. If not, help her organize a fund raiser or blanket drive. There are many creative ways to give children a sense of control. While they aren't going to stop global warming tomorrow, you can help them put the larger issue into perspective while doing something. Search for options of control that are age-appropriate, and introduce perspective with books like *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss.
- When it is difficult to talk directly about a worrisome subject, reassure children through reading and discussion. Books can be good teachers as can discussions about movies. Choose a picture book, children's book, or movie with a theme that surrounds the stressor or worry, and discuss the feelings of the characters, their reactions, and their behaviors without ever relating it directly to the child or situation. Use stories about yourself and others in the same way to let the child draw links and learn the lesson in a non-threatening way. This approach can validate feelings without directly confronting the child or exploring the issue on a personal level.
- When a child has difficulty "shutting his brain off" before going to sleep, consider developing a **short** ritual that works like a switch for them. Don't get complex or too detailed because that can have the opposite effect. The ritual can include some time for thinking first to help normalize the behavior and make it easier to control. Having some worry time each day can also be an effective intervention—the permission helps normalize the behavior and the act can help clear the mind.
- Monitor how often the problems arise, how intense they are, and how long they last. Remember, frequency, intensity, and duration are the factors to monitor. If the worries or stressors are interfering with getting things done, or if the typical pattern you see is changing, seek professional help. Rule out physical or medical causes and then explore psychological ones.

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