



# Kids and Stress

## Understanding Your Child's Emotions



Upsetting things happen in every family's life. Sometimes these upsetting things can be big, like when someone close to the family becomes ill or dies, when parents separate, or when a teenage child gets into trouble. Other times these things can seem bigger to the child than to the adult, like when a pet dies or the child starts a new school.

Kids and their parents don't show their feelings in the same ways when something stressful happens. When adults are sad or stressed, they usually are able to know what they are feeling and why they are upset. They may explain to people around them, "I'm really down because my dad is in the hospital," or "Sorry if I sounded mean—I'm having a hard time because I'm worried that I'll lose my job." Since they can recognize and name their feelings, adults can also do things to help themselves. This can mean getting support from people around them or doing little things for themselves like taking a walk or asking a neighbor to watch the kids for a couple of hours.

It is usually pretty easy to tell when a child is happy or excited about something. But kids have different ways of showing that they are stressed. Young children usually don't have the experience or the words to say things like, "I'm worried because my mom is sad that my grandma is sick, and I'm also kind of mad at my mom for being at the hospital with my grandma." Kids may not even realize that they are having all of these mixed-up feelings!

When young children are stressed, they often show their feelings by changing their behavior. Sometimes little things like not getting to watch their favorite TV show will make them cry hard or become very angry. Other times, they may start clinging to their parents and refusing to leave them or to go to school. They may fight with their friends or say that nobody likes them. Other kids may start having trouble with things that they used to be able to do. For example, a child who was potty trained may start wetting his pants again, or a child may begin sucking her thumb after having stopped. These behavior changes are kids' ways of saying, "Hey, Mom and Dad, something is bothering me!"



### How Parents Can Help

There are several ways for parents to help their children to get through hard times. Here are some things you can do:



- **NOTICE** changes in your child's behavior. These changes can show that your child is upset and needs your support.
- **SPEND SPECIAL TIME** with your child - even just 5 minutes of one-on-one playtime with toys, playing along with your child's game, talking about whatever he wants. This special time is a wonderful way to calm kids down when they are upset. It helps them feel safe and loved no matter what. Sometimes this special time helps calm parents down, too.

- TALK to children about feelings. Teach them the names for feelings and talk to them about how you are feeling. For example:



- "It makes me feel happy when you are nice to your brother."
- "I'm feeling sad right now because Grandpa is sick. "
- "It made me angry when that man hit my car."
- "I'm feeling nervous because I really want to get this job."

When you tell kids how you are feeling, it lets them know that it is okay to talk about their feelings. Of course, there are some things that kids don't need to know about. If you are clearly upset about something you don't think the kids should know about, it is better just to say, "I'm just a little sad (or angry) about something," than to tell them to leave you alone or try to make them think that you aren't upset.

- TELL other people who care for your child what is happening in your child's life. It can help teachers and babysitters deal with your child better if they know if he or she is upset about something.

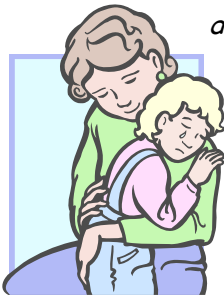
Here is an example of how a mom helped her son with his feelings:

*Leslie was a single mom. Her 4-year-old son Anthony had an older cousin, Ben, who he was really close to. Ben would take Anthony to the park and play with him at least once a week. Sometimes Anthony even told people that Ben was his dad.*

*One day Ben was in a car accident. He was very badly hurt and was in the hospital in a coma. When Leslie told Anthony that Ben was hurt, he didn't seem sad right away. He just kept playing with his toy cars. But that night, Anthony got very mad when his little sister bumped into him by accident. He started screaming at her, and punched her in the stomach.*

*Leslie was already upset about Ben herself. She felt very angry that Anthony would make things worse by hurting his sister. It seemed for a minute that he just didn't care about Ben or about how she was feeling.*

*Leslie told Anthony to sit by himself in the corner for three minutes for hitting. While he was in the corner, he started crying very hard. He didn't usually cry like that when sent to the corner for misbehavior. Leslie started thinking that maybe Anthony was upset about Ben but didn't know how to talk about it.*



*After Anthony's time in the corner was over, Leslie decided it was a good time to have their special time. She thought it would be best to do something quiet. She got out crayons and paper and colored with Anthony.*

*Anthony asked his mom if she would draw a picture of him and Ben.*

*While she was drawing, Leslie said, "I am sad about Ben getting hurt. You must feel sad, too." Anthony just looked down, but Leslie could see that his face was very sad. She put him on her lap and held him. They finished coloring the picture together, and Leslie told Anthony that she would take it to Ben the next day when she went to see him in the hospital.*