

How to Model Healthy Coping Skills

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Helping kids learn strategies for handling big emotions

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BeyondWords 

Guilt. Shame. Anger. Fear. We've all experienced these uncomfortable feelings, sometimes at intensities that are hard to tolerate. Painful emotions are part of being human, and learning how to respond to them in healthy and sustainable ways is one of the most important lessons a child can learn.

One of the best ways to help children navigate big feelings is through modeling healthy coping skills. Grace Berman, LCSW, a clinical social worker at the Child Mind Institute, defines coping skills as practices we can use to reduce the intensity or frequency of an unwanted emotion. Different people may rely on different coping skills, but here are some examples of safe, effective practices that are often helpful in stressful situations:

- Deep breathing
- Going for a walk or exercising
- Mindfulness practices
- Listening to music
- Writing in a journal
- Sensory stimulation, like splashing cold water on your face or holding ice cubes
- Calling a friend
- Playing with a pet
- Positive self-talk ("I made a mistake, but now I know better for next time.")

In addition to helping improve mood, coping skills are a great way to practice acting with intention. Strong emotions sometimes give us the urge to act out in ways that we may later regret, and this is especially true for children and teens,

who tend to have higher levels of impulsivity than adults. Coping skills can give kids the space they need to think before they act, helping them stay in control of their behavior.

So how do you model these important skills for your child? We've provided some pointers below.

Take space when you need it

One of the most reliable ways of managing your feelings in a stressful situation is to remove yourself from it, even if just for a little bit. Leaving the room before your feelings become overwhelming makes it less likely that you will explode in front of your children, while also showing them that it's okay to take breaks to acknowledge and respond to intense emotions.

Stepping away from an unresolved problem or conflict can be uncomfortable or even feel like a way of ignoring the issue. But it's important to remember that an emotion's intensity tends to increase until we get some distance from whatever it is that caused it.

"It helps to think about the life cycle of an emotion," Berman explains, "and to recognize that getting away from the trigger naturally brings that emotion down. And that's a big thing we focus on in therapy, being able to ask ourselves, 'When is my emotion's intensity so high that I need to do something to get away from it?' And it's when we give ourselves that space that we really become able to think about additional coping skills."

Of course, it's important not to leave your child unsupervised in potentially unsafe situations. If your child is also overwhelmed or is too young to be left by themselves, make sure that another parent or trusted adult is available to be present for them before stepping away.

Talk kids through how you cope

When modeling for your child, talking to them about how and why you use coping strategies can help clarify your intentions. This is especially true for younger children, who might have a harder time grasping the significance of certain actions without a verbal explanation. For example, if you need to step away for a few minutes, telling your child that you need to spend some time tending to your feelings before leaving the room lets them know that they are not being punished or abandoned. Going a step further and breaking down the specific skills you will use while away ("I need some time to calm down, so I'm going to go listen to music for 15 minutes, and then I'll be back") gives them an example to emulate in the future.

Narration can also be a helpful tool for parenting older children and teens, because talking through your own emotional experience gives you a way to encourage healthy behavior patterns without getting into a power struggle. “We know that when a child is really upset or escalated, telling them to take some deep breaths and calm down is likely to backfire,” says Berman. “And that’s where narration can be helpful. It’s not saying *you* do this, it’s saying *I’m* doing this. And it’s giving kids the space to do so as well without forcing it on them.”

Show your feelings (even the painful ones)

It’s natural to want to protect your child from pain and discomfort. But unwanted emotions — even the most intense ones — are a normal part of life. The sooner we can accept that our children will experience painful feelings from time to time, the more we can help them manage those feelings when they do come up.

When it comes to modeling, this means that the impulse to avoid being sad, angry, or anxious in front of your child can be more harmful than helpful. If you only show your child your cheerful, relaxed side, they may get the message that difficult feelings are something to be ashamed of or avoided. While it can be uncomfortable for your child to see you get upset, being able to watch you self-soothe and put words to your experience (“I’m sad about some news I heard today, so I’m going to talk it over with a friend”) can be helpful and reassuring.

At the same time, sharing your feelings with your children shouldn’t be confused with losing control or lashing out at them. “There’s a big difference between emotions and behavior,” says Berman. “If you get mad and yell at your child, it’s not your anger that’s the problem — it’s the way you’ve chosen to respond to it. What we really want to be doing is modeling what it’s like to cope well, even when we’re at emotion level ten.”

Be kind to yourself

Of course, responding to difficult emotions with intention and grace is easier said than done. So keep trying, and be gentle with yourself when you get discouraged.

For parents who are feeling insecure about their modeling skills, Berman recommends starting small. Regularly practicing just one or two healthy ways of managing stress can help you deescalate conflict and model healthy behavior for your kids as you build confidence in yourself as a parent and role model.

And remember: self-kindness is one of the most important coping skills that you can teach your kids. “We have this tendency to be really hard on ourselves,” Berman notes, “and kids adapt to that pretty quickly.” One of the most effective ways to counter negative self-talk in kids is by showing them what it looks like to

have compassion for yourself even (and especially!) when you mess up. Speaking kindly to yourself and celebrating your accomplishments — even when they feel small — is an important form of self-care, but it's also a crucial part of parenting.

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