

HELPING CHILDREN COPE AFTER COMING TO A NEW COUNTRY



People who have been forced to leave their country and seek safety in another country, have been through difficult and often very scary events. Coming to a new country is also hard. The language, food and culture are different. People are often separated from their family and friends and worried about their safety. There is often a lot of pressure for money and people may be worried about how they will support themselves and their family.

Past difficult events and current pressures impact how we think, feel and act. This often looks different for children than adults.

Because parents and other caregivers know and love their child they are in the best position to help their child heal from past events, manage worries, and adjust to a new environment. This handout helps parents and caregivers understand common reactions in children, and gives helpful tips for how they can support their child.

YOUNG CHILDREN

Young children often do not have the words to express how they feel and so emotions often show-up in how they behave or act. Common signs of fear, worry and stress in young children include:

- Having trouble falling asleep on their own
- Waking up frequently or having nightmares
- Wetting the bed
- Returning to younger behaviors or habits they outgrew (like toileting themselves or returning to younger ways of talking)
- Being afraid to separate from a parent or caregiver, even for a short period of time
- Being unable to calm themselves after getting upset
- Developing new fears or worries about lots of different things
- Bodily complaints (stomachaches, headaches, etc.)
- Aggressive behavior or play
- Repetitive play that acts out a past scary event

REMEMBER

Difficult feelings often produce difficult behavior!

Here are some ways you can help your young child with their fears, worries and stress:

- Make time to be together; hold them.
- Use simple words to let them know you are here and will keep them safe. For example, “Mommy is here” or “Daddy has you.”
- Keep them away from frightening images (television, social media, etc.) and conversations (radio, adults talking, etc.).
- Have a regular routine that includes set times to wake up, eat, and go to bed.
- Do familiar things with them like sing a song or tell them a story.
- When your child has difficult behavior, stay calm. You being calm will help calm them down. It also lets them know that they are safe with you.
- If you have to go away, even for a short while, tell them where you are going and when you will be back. (“Mommy has to go to the store and will be back in about an hour.”) Give them something familiar to hold (a picture, a toy, etc.) while you are gone.
- If a child is upset, help them identify the feeling so in the future they can find the words. For example, “I see how sad you are.”
- If a child is behaving in a way you do not like, first identify the feeling and then direct them to a better or more appropriate way to manage that feeling. For example, “I see you are angry, but it is not OK to hit your brother. Take some deep breaths.”
- If your child is old enough, help them identify what works best to calm them down or soothe them. This will need to be done at a time when they are calm and rested. You can prompt your child by offering suggestions like doing jumping jacks, taking time out to be by themselves, being held, singing, drawing, etc. The next time your child gets upset, you can say, “Seems like you are really frustrated. This is a good time to do some jumping jacks!”
- If your child wants to talk about what happened to them or their feelings, let them. They might do this through drawing, play acting, or telling a story. Give your child enough space and time to tell the story in their own way. Make sure not to minimize their feelings. For example, don’t say things like “It wasn’t that bad” or “It was worse for others.” If you want, you can join them in the story telling by saying things like, “I remember that” or “I saw that happen too.”
- Point out behavior you want repeated and be specific. For example, “I really like how you shared your toy with your brother. That is a kind thing to do.”

A FUN BREATHING EXERCISE FOR CHILDREN

When we take deep slow breaths, it tells our body we are safe and helps us be calmer. One way to do this with young children is to imagine smelling a cup of warm tea and then blowing on it to cool it. You will need to do this at a time when they are calm and rested. Then you can remind them of this practice when they are upset. Often it helps for you to join in the practice with your child. As they see you doing it, they will join.

Sometimes we all feel mad or frustrated or angry. Breathing can help us feel better. When I get upset I imagine I have a cup of hot tea in my hand. (Pretend you are holding a cup of warm tea.) I like to smell the tea (take a deep breath) and then blow on it to cool it down (blow out through your mouth). Let's pour a cup of tea and try!

Pretend to hold the tea, smell the tea, and blow on the tea to cool it down several times. You can also ask your child things like, "What flavor do you think the tea is?" or "Do you think this tea is cool enough yet?" to make it more fun and interactive.

OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENS

As a child gets older, they have more words and are better able to express their feelings. At the same time, they may have difficulty putting how they are feeling into words or feel shame, guilt or confusion about feeling a certain way. Common signs of fear, worry and stress in older children and teens include:

- Fear or worry about the safety of self or others
- Staying focused on a past scary event(s), like repeatedly talking about it, drawing it, or worrying it might happen again
- Decrease in the ability to concentrate or pay attention
- Having trouble remembering things
- Increased irritability or anger
- Increased sadness
- Wanting to be alone a lot; pulling away from loved ones
- Bodily complaints (stomachaches, headaches, etc.)
- Significant increase or decrease in sleep
- Not wanting to leave the home or engage in activities
- Other changes in behavior from how they were before the event or move to how they are now
- Turning to harmful habits like alcohol, drugs or doing things that are harmful to themselves or others

While older children, even older teens and young adults, may be becoming more independent they still need the guidance and wisdom that parents and caregivers can provide.

- Let your child know that you recognize that this process is hard and that you are here to support them. For example, "This has been a really difficult time. If you want to talk about how you are feeling, I am here to listen."
- Make time to do things with your older child or teen. This could be watching a television show together, listening to music, going for a walk, playing a game, or anything that is pleasurable and meaningful to you both.
- Ask your child questions and make time to listen to their answers. This can be about simple things, like asking them about their day, or more difficult things like asking them how they are feeling about coming to a new country.
- When an older child expresses emotion, they may act embarrassed or ashamed or struggle to find the right words. Reassure them that it is OK to express themselves. You may say things like, "I feel that way sometimes too" or "It's understandable you would feel that way" or "It's OK to feel sad about that" or "It can be hard to talk about this".
- If your older child is engaging in behaviors you don't approve of, stay calm. You can still enforce your rules and consequences, but you want to do so calmly so that older children receive the message that they are safe, but you are still in control.
- At a moment when your child is calm and rested, have a discussion about what helps them calm down or manage their emotions. You may say something like, "Life is really stressful right now. It makes sense that at times you might be really angry, feel really sad, or frustrated. I want to know what helps you when you feel that way so I can be supportive."
- Have a regular household routine and encourage your child to set some routines for themselves (setting their morning alarm, taking a shower at night, etc.).
- Find activities or groups where your child can be involved, express themselves, and make connections. This can include things like academics, sports, after school clubs, religious activities, etc.

Even when you cannot fix things, being there for your child, showing them love, paying attention, being patient, and listening, helps them feel safe and connected.

HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU MAY NEED MORE HELP

Parents and caregivers should give children of all ages time to heal and adjust. However, they should reach out for help if:

- They don't see their child's mood and behavior improving over time
- They notice their child's mood and behavior is getting worse over time
- Their child has frequent bodily complaints (headache, stomachache, etc.)
- Their child is having trouble regaining a skill that they had previously mastered (i.e., they used to toilet themselves and now they are unable)
- They are worried about their child's development
- Their child is talking about harming themselves or others
- Their child is engaging in harmful behavior like alcohol, drugs, or gang involvement
- They have any other concerns that are worrying

Often the best person to reach out to is your child's doctor. Let them know of any concerns you may have, and if needed, they can provide a referral to the right support. Parents and caregivers may also want to reach out to their child's teacher or school, a caseworker, or a counselor to discuss concerns and available supports.

