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# HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH WORRY AND STRESS

*Dr Beth Saggars (QUT) & Dr Wendi Beamish (Griffith University)*



Worrying and anxiety are some of the biggest mental health problems facing children today.

People often assume children have no worries or nothing to be stressed about. However, children, like adults, do worry about a range of things. There may be times during periods of stress or change when children worry more intensely about things than usual.

A certain amount of stress is normal, and all children will experience some form of worry in their everyday lives. Children's reactions to stress vary and these reactions to stressors are influenced by:

- Age and developmental stage
- Ability to cope
- Length of time experiencing stress
- Intensity of worrying

The amount and type of support children receive may influence how much worry they experience. For most children, worrying occurs when everyday stressors become too much. Two key indicators that children are experiencing stress are a change in behaviour or regression of behaviour. When children experience stress, they change their behaviour and react to the stress by doing things that are not in keeping with their usual repertoire. Some key indicators that children are worrying about something are excessive emotional displays such as crying or anger, as well as disruptions to sleep, a need for perfectionism, or excessive avoidance of tasks.

*Frydenberg, E., Deans, J., & O'Brien, K. (2012). Developing everyday coping skills in the early years. London: Continuum.*

*Honig, A.S. (2010). Little kids, big worries: Stress-busting tips for early childhood classrooms. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.*

Early educators can employ a number of strategies to support young children to manage their worries and stress. Such as:

- Fostering a trusting relationship with the child
- Ensuring structure, routine and consistency are in place e.g., establishing set routines and rules, but limiting child's participation in any activity which appears to create concern
- Work with the child to identify activities or things that have a calming influence. For example, teach the child to take a deep breath or introduce simple relaxation activities to the group
- Label emotions you think the child is experiencing e.g., "you seem very angry about not getting a turn on the swing."
- Engage in active listening with the child to facilitate shared understanding of what happened and what they are experiencing. Prompt their recount with questions such as "What happened first?" and "Then what happened?"
- Pair the child's recount with the emotions you think they are feeling "That must have made you feel very sad."

Teaching children to deal with worry and to stay calm requires coaching them to become competent self-managers and helping them develop a strong sense of self-awareness. Over time, a child's growing self-awareness progressively fosters self-understanding and self-management of emotions. This builds confidence, self-discipline, adaptability, and resourcefulness. It is these skills that allow children to develop the coping mechanisms they need to manage their worries, stay calm, and deal effectively with everyday stressors.

