

COUNSELING NEWS

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Helping Children Cope with “Big Feelings”

Children can have the same big feelings that we do. The difference for adults, though, is that we have more life experience to know how to deal with difficult emotions. When our children feel fear, anxiety, or anger, they need our help to learn to cope. Here are some tips:

Name the feeling(s)

Help your child figure out which feeling they are having/were having. Putting a name to it can help validate their experience. Having a feelings poster or reading children’s books about feelings can be helpful to identify their own feeling.

Normalize the feeling(s)

It can be confusing for a child whose feelings take over and lead to behaviors they may not usually have. Explain that all people have these feelings sometimes, and we all have to learn how to manage them.

Talk about the brain

Our brains and our bodies are connected, and our brains send out signals when we experience certain “big feelings.” Explain that we have a part of our brain (thinking brain) that’s in charge of making decisions, thinking things through, and managing our emotions. Explain that another part of our brain (emotional brain) is in charge of important things like breathing, digesting food, and holds onto big feelings like anger or anxiety; this part of our brain also reacts to any threats, and can make us feel like we need to run (flight), fight back, or freeze. Sometimes this part of our brain overreacts, and we need to try strategies to calm it down.

Practice self-regulation skills

When children are calm, their thinking brain is on, and this is the best time to come up with a plan for when their emotional brain tries to take over. Encourage taking a break (not a timeout), deep breathing, releasing angry energy by exercising, and relaxation strategies such as progressive muscle relaxation, coloring, calm down jars, music, etc. Practice these repeatedly when they are calm. Helping your child begin to recognize their body’s early signs of a big feeling (heart racing, clenched jaw, etc.) can help them learn when to employ their self-regulation skills.

Happy April!

Ms. Katie