

THE STRUGGLE IS NOT ONLY REAL, IT IS NECESSARY

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From an early age, we are subliminally taught that stress is a bad thing. Whether frustrated because your LEGO tower broke or confused about which two paint colors to mix to get green, you were more likely to hear “Calm down – no reason to get stressed,” than you were to hear “Let’s use your stress to help us make a plan for how to solve this problem.”

For most adults, the natural, well-meaning response to a child’s expression of stress, or most any unwanted feeling, is to try to fix it, make it go away, avoid it, or make it seem like it isn’t such a big deal. We do this by saying things like:

“Don’t be sad.”

“No need to worry about it.”

“It’s not as bad as you think it is.”

“Just try thinking about something else.”

“Let me do that for you.”

We all say and do these things, and the good intention is clear. Nobody likes to see a child struggle or experience discomfort. Unfortunately, manageable stress and discomfort is necessary for growth. When we minimize, distract, or dismiss a child’s emotional reaction, we are sending the message that feelings are unimportant, untrustworthy, and bad. This means that we are also missing the opportunity to teach the child about why we have feelings, and how even the unwanted ones are incredibly useful.

Stress and anxiety are at an all-time high nowadays. It is important to think about small things that we can do each day to help children feel more confident and competent in their ability to navigate this stressful world. One of the best ways we can help them to become more resilient is by creating an environment where emotions are acknowledged, accepted, and used in a functional manner. To start doing this, here are some basic things to keep in:

- 1) Feelings are information. They are telling us that something is important and may require our attention.
- 2) Feelings are never bad or “negative,” though they may be unwanted.
- 3) Stress is often a good thing – without it we would not prepare for tests, show up to work, or care about our relationships. Life without stress would be pretty unfulfilling.
- 4) The goal is not to control stress or other unwanted feelings – the goal is to recognize, use, and cope with them.
- 5) Acknowledging and accepting unwanted emotions is one of the best ways to reduce their impact.
- 6) Regular, casual discourse about wanted and unwanted feelings is healthy and normal. If we talk about the day to day feelings, it will make it easier to talk about the “big ones.”
- 7) Let children struggle sometimes. Don’t feel the need to fix things right away. Help them express how they are feeling, gently guide them toward problem solving, and praise their persistence in the face of challenge.

Dr. Currie is a pediatric neuropsychologist at NESCA. She specializes in the evaluation of anxious children and teens, working to identify underlying learning, attention, or emotional challenges. She enjoys working with the seemingly “unmotivated” child, as well as children who have “flown under the radar” for years due to their desire to succeed.

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