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TABLE TALK

Thoughts, feelings, behaviors, oh my!

May is Mental Health Awareness month, a great starting point to take a proactive approach on how you can support your child's mental health care.



Talking to your kids

Let your child or teen know that we all worry and feel anxious at times. Our brain and body is actually designed to get through scary or tough feelings, but there are also things they can do to make it a little easier.

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Read a book and talk about the characters' feelings:

For example, 'The bunny looks scared. They're saying they don't want to go to the fair, and the bunny is shaking. Let's see what the bunny is going to do.'

Ask questions: "What do you think the bunny should do?" You can brainstorm coping skills together and then apply them to your child's life. "Hey, it looks like you are scared about going to the doctors, just like bunny was about the fair, remember what we said bunny could do, should we try one of those ideas?" Another great way to help kids label and understand thoughts, feelings and behaviors at an early age is to use the human figure to help label and draw where they 'feel the feeling'.

FOR TEENS

A tool for teens who suffer from panic or intense anxiety, is a technique you can lead that helps their reactive brain become more logical, reducing the intensity of the feeling. It goes like this.

Distract: Stop and name five items in the room, look for five things that are red. Use what works for you.

Talk through it: When they're calmer, ask them what they are thinking, what they feel, what their body feels like. This helps them build a habit of stopping and learning to reflect and confront their thoughts.

A Special-Needs Perspective:

While any of these strategies can apply to all children, children with special needs may face more challenges with language, emotional regulation and impulsivity. Drawing the mind-body connection can help them identify the anxiety.

Thermometer technique:

Find a picture or draw a thermometer and divide into four sections. Ask your child what words and color could be used to label each section (such as calm, uncomfortable, stressed and afraid). What coping skills would be helpful to decrease those feelings? For some children looking up pictures in magazines or google and placing them next to the words can be a helpful visual. Practice this in a calm state, then apply it when they're activated.

Your child may benefit from therapy if you answer "yes" to any of these questions:

*Anxiety may look and feel different for children and teens based on developmental stages and different worries.

Does your child or teen:

- Show signs of consistent separation anxiety, specifically at the school or teen age years of development
- Have extreme fears or phobias about specific things or situations such as being afraid of dogs, spiders, blood, small spaces
- Worry about the future or thinking bad things will happen
- Refuse or have a hard time going to school, social events or new situations
- Complaining often of stomach aches, headaches or other physical pains
- Have episodes of panic (intense fears, racing heart, dizziness, feeling shaky or sweaty)
- Have a really hard time concentrating, ongoing irritability, or feeling overly self-consciousness
- Show signs of depression or social anxiety

You may benefit from parent coaching if you:

- Want to help your child with panic attacks
- Are looking for ways to help your child identify, understand and cope with their emotions
- Want to support an anxious child, teen or young adult more effectively

Did you know?

Anxiety was on the rise in children and teens before COVID-19. In 2020 at the height of the pandemic it was estimated 5.6 million (9.2%) children and teens (ages 3-17) had been diagnosed with anxiety. In 2021 a study in JAMA suggested the numbers have now doubled with 20.5% of youth worldwide experiencing symptoms of anxiety.

With anxiety on the rise, now's the time to help kids understand the connection between their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Get support

If your child is having a hard time with their feelings, separation, overly worried, avoiding social situations you might consider scheduling a therapy session for them. Coaching can help parents develop strategies for helping children handle their emotions, develop healthy behaviors, and help them form meaningful bonds.

[Sign in](#) to schedule a session, or learn more about how Spring Health can support you.