



Comforting Your Young Child

When your child startles you from sleep screaming for help with the scary monster in his dream or under the bed, what do you do? Chances are you rush to his bedside, hug him tightly, caress his head gently with soothing assurances that you're there to help him. Perhaps you sing him a lullaby or ask his teddy bear if the monster is gone. The natural response to comfort guides you to appropriate action; in fact, you may be parenting at your creative best in such circumstances.

The very presence of a parent is a comfort to a baby or young child. Observe a newborn's building anxiety as he is passed from relative to relative - the crescendo of his crying urgently demands that he be returned to his mother where he settles down to be held quietly or fed. Behold the preschooler pressing his nose to the window for a first glimpse of a returning parent. What a responsibility for parents to be the centre of their child's universe!

Children experience numerous stresses - uncomfortable clothing, eating meals they don't enjoy at times they'd rather be playing, routines and schedules controlled by adults, teasing and scolding, new siblings - the list goes on. By empathizing with their child's world view, parents can lessen or even eliminate these tensions. Trips to pick up older siblings from activities can seem like one-hour jail terms for the young child, who must leave an interesting game to struggle into a snowsuit and be

confined to a car seat. Parents can show they understand and respect that point of view by playing tapes, providing snacks or special toys in the car.

When parents listen for the hidden messages in their children's complaints, they can get to the heart of that upset - and hopefully respond in a meaningful way. For example, a child who screams, "I hate it when you remind me to buckle my seatbelt!" may actually be saying, "You don't think I'm smart... and neither does my teacher...and this worries me."

It is no miracle that children show resiliency - an ability to adapt to severe stress and rebound to pre-stress levels - when they have caring, loving adults to support them. Care and stimulation in the early years does more than make children happier, easier to live with and less volatile in their daily lives. The research now shows that the kind of cuddling, talking and playing that parents do with children "...strengthens their capacity to learn and to cope emotionally with life's stresses. Providing care and stimulation in the early years of a child's development offers huge rewards in developmental terms" (Guy, 1997, 5).

Perhaps a child is suffering unduly from school stress, not enough free time, pressure from peers, too much responsibility at home or the weight of his parents' pending separation. As

empathetic listeners, parents and all caregivers can help children feel safe in stressful times, taking their anxieties seriously and providing assurances of help with solutions.

The challenge is to stay tuned to children's stresses in order to respond in ways that help them develop their own stress management strategies. Parents don't necessarily need to "fix" every problem their child experiences, but the wisdom of life experience and an empathetic ear are powerful helping tools.

What calms you when you feel overwhelmed -- a warm drink and a quiet time with a book? a physical workout? a chat with your family doctor? a body massage? Why not adapt your own stress-relieving strategies to comfort your child? You may find stress relief by taking a hot shower with classical music playing in the background; your child might relax by listening to Sharon, Lois & Bram as he plays in the tub.

The child who is encouraged to talk about his problems in a non-threatening environment knows that he is valued and that there are others to help him along. An understanding parent could well be a safety net for life.

Reference

Guy, Kathleen A. (Ed.) (1997). *Our Promise to Children*. Ottawa: Canadian Institute of Child Health.