Helping young children manage stress

K-State extension specialist advises a calm, nurturing approach

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Stress: Just saying the word leaves some people on edge, whether it's giving a talk, dealing with a work event or trying to manage a toddler in a tantrum. Everyone experiences stress from time-to-time.

And in the case of a stressed-out child, Kansas State University child development specialist Bradford Wiles said it's best to offer support in the time of a perceived crisis.

“The first thing we can do as parents is to minimize our own stress by being patient and taking deep breaths before responding authentically to our child," Wiles said.

He used an analogy of how people on an airplane are instructed to put their oxygen mask on first in the case of an emergency before offering assistance to those around them.

“You want to make sure you are calm before helping the child because if you go into that situation agitated, your efforts at calming them will be much more difficult,” Wiles said.

He explained that in the moment of high stress, it is difficult for rational reasoning to occur.

“When we are stressed, our mind essentially constricts to where we can’t really process anything other than the things that are immediately in front of us," Wiles said. “One of the problems with young children who are stressed out is that they have no interest in redirection because they are just reacting to their stress at the moment.”

He said engaging children in a meaningful and compassionate way is the best approach.

“We have to get them to a place where they can start to think through things and we can do that though mindful behaviors,” Wiles said.

Along with deep breathing, Wiles encouraged parents and caregivers to offer a hug or physical comfort that many young children respond well to.
“Once the children are calm, we can engage them and help them return to a more normal interaction in the world,” Wiles said.

Timeouts may not work for young children, he said.

“It is hard for a child that is really escalated to understand what they are supposed to do in a timeout, which is to think about what they’ve done and how they might do it differently,” Wiles said. “It is punitive to put them in a space where they can’t be comforted and try to self soothe when they don’t have those skills.”

Instead, Wiles said, “I would try to soothe them until they are calm, and then try to get them to tell you what they did wrong because the goal is to try to dismantle the agitation rather than accelerating it like when you put them in a location away from you where you can’t help them.”

He also said it is important to be aware of the tone of voice that is being used with the child.

“Our tone speaks volumes about how our messages are received. If our tone is harsh, our children are aware that there is a message that comes with that and conversely if our tone is calm and compassionate, they hear that too,” Wiles said.

Lastly, Wiles reminded parents that they are continually modeling behavior choices to their children.

He said: “If you are stressed and running around upset and yelling, then your children will see that and act that way too. The difference is that most adults can keep from going into the meltdown phase and children just don’t have the ability to regulate to that degree.”

More information on child development is available online from K-State Research and Extension.