

## Protective Parenting

Some of the biggest dangers to our children are not the ones we fear the most. They can be the ones less obvious, and even present in our home. Our children live in a stressful world. One, we would venture to say, that is busier and which contains more demands and stressors than we knew as children and adolescents. Along with this stress, they have less down-time, playtime, warm face-to-face connection with people and spend less time connecting with nature. To be fair, the same is possibly true for us as parents. Many of us lead lives that are busier, more complex and stressful than those our parents had when we were young.

Unfortunately it can be us, the caring parents, who inadvertently load our children with extra stress and worry. We can find ourselves walking a very fine line between protecting our children by providing them with information, and protecting them by sheltering them from certain information.

An overly stressful life can indeed impact on a child's physical and emotional wellbeing. Stress can lead to anxiety and depression, and even obesity and substance abuse.

Think for a moment of how we might worry about certain things, for instance job security, issues at work, money concerns, our relationships, our friendships, health concerns for ourselves and loved ones, family matters. Now ask yourself how many of these adult concerns you share with your children. It is important to know that with their immature emotional and cognitive development, children find many concepts much more challenging, and stress is amplified for them. Add to that their sense of powerlessness, their often black and white view of the world and their naivety. Children who are stressed are laying down neural pathways in a context of stressful over-activity and upsetting images in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

We are not talking about teaching our children about 'stranger danger' here. Often in our work, we find ourselves talking to (sometimes, quite young) students who are worried about Dad maybe losing his job and not having enough money to pay the mortgage or the school fees; children who worry that maybe their parents are going to break up, or that they may have to move house or change school because of uncertain family circumstances. We talk to children who have an explicit knowledge of Grandma's medical condition, a parent's infidelity, or an older sibling's drug habit. In essence, things that they really shouldn't know about, let alone be worrying about; things they are worrying about when they should be playing, enjoying a book, concentrating in school or happily doing their homework.

On one hand we must protect them from physical danger by providing them with cold hard facts, yet on the other, we should protect their innocence and trust by sheltering them from adult worries that are part of everyday adult life.

We hope some of the following guidelines might be helpful:

- There is a very big difference between lying to your child and not giving them all the available information. Our advice is to always tell your child the truth, but you need to be wise about how much they need to know.
- If it is something they must know, for example, preparing a child for the imminent death of a grandparent, with younger children, always start with the minimal amount of information. If they need to know more, they will ask. Drip feed appropriate amounts of information, at an age appropriate level, until they are satisfied. You will know when this is because the questions will stop. Simply use this same rule for your older children.

- Teach your children some stress reduction skills, and model these skills yourself. Physical activity is probably the best one. Walk the dogs together. Get out into nature together; the beach, the bush, the mountain. We have so many wonderful places so close to our homes.
- There are some really good apps that teach deep breathing exercises and relaxation techniques. Visit the App Store or YouTube. Many are free. Some are guided (i.e. have a voiceover), while some are not, for example, 'Calm Breath Bubble' or 'Simply Breathe' apps (YouTube).
- Try not to over-schedule your children; they will want to try lots of different activities as they go through school. This is healthy and normal, but keep it manageable and factor in playtime.
- Children often get on board with family pursuits, but encourage their passions, even if they are not the passions you had hoped for your child. You pursue yours.
- Listen, talk and laugh together. It sounds easy but can be very difficult to find time. Orchestrate time for this. Build little family rituals that promote this. Tidying the kitchen together after dinner, a bed-time chat and cuddle, or travel-time chat in the car.
- Check your own stress levels. When you are buzzing around stressed and cranky at home, this will, in turn, stress your children. Think about what this is teaching them.
- When there is major change in the pipeline, do all the 'working out' behind closed doors. Let your children know important family news when decisions have been made, so they are not going to be stressed by uncertainty. Be very clear to them about how the change will affect their daily life. Children should never have to worry about where they are going to live, whether or not there will be food on the table and who is going to look after them. It is our job as parents to ensure they feel safe at all times.
- Protect sleep. The best form of stress reduction (for all of us) is a good and regular sleep routine, and stress is the thing most likely to disrupt sleep. Make a calm and regular bedtime for your children a top priority.
- Limit screen time and teach your child how to be a smart user of technology. Teach them that they are in control of their phone, not the other way around. They should be the one to decide when to use it, when to send a text or check a notification, not the phone. Point it out to them when the phone seems to be in control.
- Finally, stay connected. What your child wants and needs most is your time and your attention. Truly.

**Useful reading:**

<http://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/family-life/protective-parenting>

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