

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH Stressful Moments AND Anxious Thoughts

Laura K. Sibbald, M.A., CCC-SLP, ASDCS, CYMHS

Over the past two years, children across the country have experienced significant changes in their homes, schools and communities. Interactions with family members, teachers, and therapists have suddenly shifted and become less familiar. For example, children may have had to work with teachers or therapists in a virtual setting, and may not have seen family members or friends in person for many months. These changes in our established routines and expectations create obstacles to learning and growth. Neurodiverse students are vulnerable to the effects of these changes, especially since they are working to process complex emotions and implement healthy coping strategies in a new environment.

As children and families shift back to in-person learning opportunities, play dates and birthday parties, there will likely be moments of stress, anxiety and escalating emotions. Children need to identify strategies to manage these big emotions, reduce worry and alleviate tension. Such strategies are called coping skills. Healthy coping skills promote a calmer state of mind, and allow for participation in a variety of desired activities without the worry of anxiety taking over. While it may seem relatively simple for a child to employ a technique such as deep breathing, this is frequently not the case. Many of us take for granted the fact that using a coping strategy requires a set of very specific skills. These include: co-regulation; self-awareness/self-monitoring; and problem-solving. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Co-regulation

Co-regulation is a connection between individuals that leads to the reciprocal relationship required for a child to feel safe exploring novel situations. It is supported by joint attention, social referencing, and perspective-taking. As this skill develops, it aids in communication and in creating a trusting relationship with another individual. This enhances a child's ability to follow the example of the person who teaches and models potential coping strategies. Teaching co-regulation can be woven into everyday activities that are done together. In essence, the focus is on working collaboratively rather than completing a task. To promote social referencing and joint attention, the adult should reduce the number of verbal directions provided, and prioritize nonverbal communication, like gesture, eye gaze, and facial expressions. When using verbal language, adults should avoid telling children what to do, and instead comment on their actions. One activity that can be used is simply walking together while maintaining the same pace, an activity which requires co-regulation abilities. While walking, vary your pace by moving more quickly then slowing down. Also, start and stop intermittently. If the child keeps walking ahead, make a comment such as, "Wow, you are walking so fast! I am all the way back here." Practicing these activities builds a sense of trust and safety, which will allow a child to want to try new things and feel empowered.

Self-awareness/Self-monitoring

Emotions can produce a range of responses that affect your body and mind. Encouraging self-awareness allows children to recognize and name what they are feeling in their bodies. For example, big emotions, like anger or excitement, can make your heart race. Sadness can make your mind wander, and make it hard to concentrate. Neurodiverse children need support in connecting emotions with language and with their bodies. This allows them to recognize and name emotions, and monitor how their bodies and minds are feeling in a variety of situations. When building self-awareness and self-monitoring skills, remember that modeling language and using visual representations can help give children the language needed to discuss feelings. Creating an “emotions word” wall helps to teach children different feelings beyond just *happy*, *sad*, and *mad*. Connecting emotions to colors may also help a child give meaning to a word. For example, writing both *frustrated* and *nervous* on orange cards for the word wall illustrates the connection between these words and solidifies their meaning. Allow children to choose which color represents the words. Their insight may differ from an adult’s perspective, and it is important for children to have meaning that is important to them. Modeling language is when adults use words to describe what they are seeing, and thereby expose the child to emotional vocabulary. They may say something like the following: “I see that your fists are clenched tightly right now; it looks like you may be feeling nervous or upset.” The adult is supplying a language model to help the child learn the vocabulary to describe feelings. Modeling language is critical for any language development and growth.



Problem-solving

Once a child develops self-awareness, the next step to implement effective coping skills is to problem-solve. Problem-solving involves reasoning through a variety of options, considering cause and effect, and finally making a choice. When engaging in problem-solving, it is important to consider the child's mindset. A relaxed mindset is more desirable than a reluctant or reactive mindset. This is why it is critical to establish a sense of safety and trust through co-regulation in order to practice these skills. When identifying options in a scenario or situation, it can be helpful to write them down so that the child can review and consider each one. Visuals such as written words or images allow for a discussion to have concrete reference points that support a sense of permanence for the child. When the information is presented visually, it does not just "go in one ear, and out the other." For example, one such visual is a scenario planning table, sometimes known as a "SOCCER" table (Scenario, Options, Consequences, Choice). This tool visually shows a variety of causal relationships within a scenario, and can support the identification of multiple pathways to solve a problem. Healthy coping cards are also a useful resource for children to use in times of anxiety and stress. A coping card is a small index card on which the child writes out preferred coping strategies for dealing with big emotions. Work with your child on the cards to ensure they offer healthy strategies rather than harmful ones. Helpful coping methods, like taking a movement break, listening to a favorite song, or using bubbles or hand fidgets, can refocus children and bring them back to the present moment. Other coping strategies, such as avoidance or overeating, may make things less intense temporarily, but they are not healthy. They are a form of distraction that may end up creating more stress.

Work in tandem with your child on co-regulation, self-awareness, self-monitoring and problem-solving. This will enable the creation of a healthy coping skills toolkit that can be used in a variety of situations. Children will not only feel empowered to make a positive choice, but also be able to venture into new situations with confidence.

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Laura K. Sibbald, MA, CCC-SLP, ASDCS, CYMHS, is a nationally certified speech-language pathologist who has extensive experience supporting the social-emotional and pragmatic language needs of students and families within the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. She works as an instructional specialist for students with autism in Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland, and has developed and implemented a variety of professional learning opportunities surrounding social-emotional competence at the state and national level.

Laura is a coauthor of the *Trauma-Informed Social-Emotional Toolbox for Children & Adolescents: 116 Worksheets & Skill-Building Exercises to Support Safety, Connection & Empowerment* (PEI, 2020) and the *Parenting Toolbox: 125 Activities Therapists Use to Reduce Meltdowns, Increase Positive Behaviors & Manage Emotions* (PEI, 2018). Both workbooks provide practical strategies that can easily transfer into clinical and educational professional practices. Most recently, Laura was a guest speaker and moderator at PESI's 2021 Autism Symposium, where she discussed Navigating Autism through a Trauma Informed Lens. Laura also had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Temple Grandin in the keynote *Different... Not Less*. Laura was an expert panelist for the 2020 Parenting Autism Summit, sponsored by The Behavior Revolution, LLP., and is certified as an Autism Spectrum Disorder Clinical

Specialist (ASDCS) and Certified Youth Mental Health Specialist (CYMHS). She is a member of the multicultural affairs committee of the Maryland Speech-Language and Hearing Association, focusing on the promotion of equity practices in diverse communicators. To further support growth and achievement of children with disabilities, Laura earned additional certifications as a Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) Certified Educator and in Educational Leadership and Supervision. She graduated from The George Washington University in 2011 with a Master's in speech-language pathology. She is currently the chair of the Alumni Advisory Council for the Speech-Language Hearing Science Department at GWU. For further resources visit PESI Publishing and Media: <https://www.pesi.com/speaker/details/01601058>, and Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Laura-Sibbald/e/B0887C76S2?ref=dbs_p_pbk_r00_abau_000000

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My Coping Card



Movement Break

My Coping Card



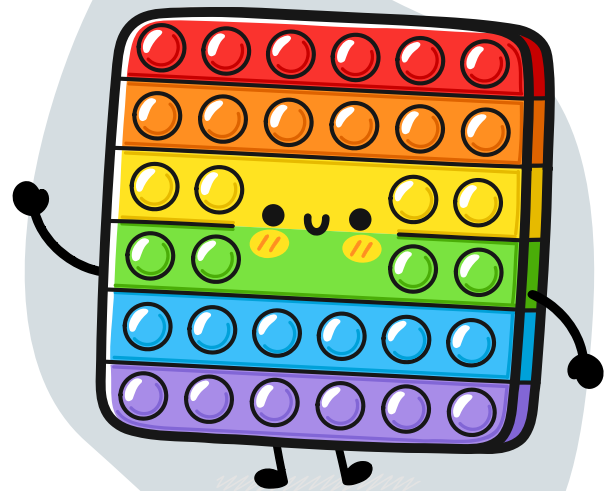
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My Coping Card



Blow Bubbles

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Fidget Toy

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Deep Breathing

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Weighted Vest

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Coloring

My Coping Card



Name: _____

Situation: _____

Highlight
the best
choices.



Evaluate:
How do you know if your choice worked?

Revise:
What changes are necessary?

Situation	Options	Consequence	Choice	Evaluate	Revise

Directions for Using the SOCCER Table

1. State the problem simply but clearly (I left my watch at home and I am afraid I will miss drama club; John and I both grabbed the same pencil; it is too noisy in the lunchroom, etc.)
2. Brainstorm options. Write down any ideas the student comes up with - even if they are not reasonable options! Offer some suggestions if they cannot come up with anything, but be careful not to force your opinion here.
3. The student should come up with what he thinks the consequence would be. Have some discussion here, but again, do not “judge” the thought process. Guide the student into understanding that all choices have consequences (if you chose to run out of the room because you are afraid you will miss drama club, you might get detention...).
4. Let the student make the choice of which option he will try. DO NOT make a judgement - no good choice/bad choice!
5. After the student implements their choice, come back to evaluate how that choice worked.
6. Revise the plan as needed. Keep completed tables where they can be easily accessed for future problem solving.

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