AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Five Ways to Teach Kids the Importance of Self-Care



As adults, we know we can be our own worst critics. As parents and caregivers, we can help kids develop strong self-care skills to help them weather adversity and cheer themselves on. Magination Press's *Fantastic You* by Danielle Dufayet shows young readers how to develop a positive and nurturing relationship with themselves. In the note to parents and caregivers, Dr. Julia Martin Burch offers strategies to help children build self-care skills that mirror what the kids in *Fantastic You* do.

Identifying Emotions

Learning to notice, identify, and soothe their own emotions begins in childhood, but your child will continue to develop these skills throughout their lives. Emotions can be overwhelming to all of us, but especially for young children, surges in emotion and the physical sensations that go with them, like butterflies in their tummies or feeling shaky, can be confusing. They rely on you to help them figure out what the feelings mean and to name them.

Get curious with your child about what they are feeling. You can ask them what is happening inside their body and if they can name the emotion they are feeling. You can also support them by describing what you see and guessing what the emotion might be that they are feeling. "I see that your face is red and your hands are in fists. When I do those actions, I'm often feeling angry. Do you think that's how you are feeling?"

Self-validation

Along with learning to recognize and identify emotions, it's important for children to learn that emotions aren't right or wrong, they just are. No matter how big or painful an emotion is, it is a safe and acceptable experience. You can help children by noticing and validating their emotions. For example, you could say, "Given that it's raining and we can't go to the beach, I can see why you are feeling sad." When children learn to validate their own feelings, it allows them to reduce the intensity of an emotion they are feeling in the moment and builds confidence in their ability to manage their emotions.

Self-soothing

Help your child discover which activities or experiences help them calm down or feel better. What helps a child feel better will depend on the situation and on

the child's preferences, so explore a lot of different activities. Some kids will find that soothing their senses with music, a hot bath, looking at clouds, or snuggling with a favorite lovey might help. Others might find a project like building a fort or putting on a puppet show is a good distraction. Finding out what helps you self-soothe is an important skill that's fun to develop.

Helpful self-talk

Learning to recognize how we talk to ourselves is another important life skill. Helping your child understand how powerful their inner voice can be is the first step in teaching them to use positive self-talk. When we talk to ourselves in a negative way, we often feel worse and are less likely to persist or persevere in a challenging situation. Then we feel badly that we've not done well or quit. Help your child notice when she puts herself down and how that makes her feel. Once she's aware that her inner voice can affect her feelings, then work on helping her come up with positive phrases to use in challenging situations. Instead of "I can't do this." rephrase to "I can't do this YET, but if I keep trying, I'll get better." Practicing helpful self-talk during calm times can make it easier for your child to to use when feeling stressed.

Model constructive coping and self-care

As parents and caregivers, we often put children's needs before our own, hiding our emotions. It's important, though, to model for kids how we manage difficult situations. When you are coping with a difficult situation that would be appropriate for your child to hear about, consider labeling your emotion and describing how you plan to cope with it.

For example, you might say, "I'm feeling sad that I had a hard day at work. To take care of myself and my feelings, I'm going to take the dog for a long walk and have a bath later tonight."

When to seek support

Learning to manage emotions is a life-long process. Children develop this skill at different rates, and it's common for children and adolescents to go through periods where they are more or less able to skillfully cope with powerful emotions. However, if your child consistently has trouble coping with painful emotions, consider seeking professional support. Consult a licensed psychologist or other mental health professional with training in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) for children.

This is an exclusive excerpt from the note to parents and caregivers by Julia Martin Burch, Ph.D. in Magination Press book *Fantastic You* by Danielle Dufayet.

This Article's Author

Julia Martin Burch, PhD is a staff psychologist at the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at McLean Hospital in Boston. Dr. Martin Burch completed her training at Fairleigh Dickinson University and Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School.She works with children, teens, and parents and specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety, obsessive compulsive, and related disorders. Outside of her work at McLean, Dr. Martin Burch gives talks to clinicians, parent groups, and schools on working with anxious youth.