Coping Skills for Kids: Some ideas to try at home

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The following is a list of coping activities I recommend for use to help your child at home with any emotion – stress, anxiety, anger, etc. All of these work best when you practice them daily with your child, during times when they are calm. By practicing when they are calm, they are able to be more effective at using the skills when they are not calm. I recommend a daily (or perhaps every other day) ritual where you practice one or more of these skills for at least 5-10 minutes. Daily practice doesn’t have to be long.

You should know first though that not all these techniques will work equally well for every child and some techniques may need specific adaptations to work best for your child’s individual needs. If you’re trying these at home and your child is still having trouble with coping, it’s a good idea to reach out and schedule an appointment with me (Dr. Steadman) or with another mental health professional that you trust. We can help you adjust the procedure to your child’s individual needs.

1. Tell a happy/relaxing story
   1. Help your child to create a relaxing story. You can do this with just words or play it out with toys, with puppets, with drawings, or with anything else that engages your child. When telling the story, encourage your child to use his or her imagination to picture all the details. I also include the five senses, encouraging the child to describe what each character sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels (touch) in the story.
2. Daily self- care
   1. You child gets to choose something he/she wants to do. The activity can be anything fun. Right before the activity, tell your child, “It’s important to always remember to take time to do something fun every day, to give us a happy brain. What can we do today to give you a happy brain?” With this simple introduction, you are reminding your child that any fun activity can also be a way to manage big feelings.
3. 54321 Grounding exercise
   1. This one is useful for panic attacks.
   2. Have your child look around his/her immediate surroundings and name 5 things he/she can see, 4 things he/she can touch, 3 things he/she can hear, 2 things he/she can smell, and 1 thing he/she can taste. This forces kids to focus on what is happening right now and helps to snap their body out of panic mode.
4. Self-hug
   1. Give yourself a hug and squeeze tight. Not only does this teach self-love and self-compassion, but it also creates a calming sensation.
5. Sing a favorite song. It doesn’t matter what the song is about. Any song will do. Dance breaks are fine too.
6. Deep breathing
   1. Anxiety disrupts your body’s physiological regulation. Breathing is one of the best ways to trick your body into returning to “normal.” Generally speaking a good goal breathing rate ranges from 8-12 breathes (in and out) per minute. This rate helps restore your physiology to “normal.”
   2. When you teach breathing to your children, tell them why you’re doing. “We’re going to breathe to keep our bodies calm.” Practice with them. It’s good for you too.
   3. There are several ways to teach breathing skills to children. Try the following:
      1. Blowing bubbles (real or imaginary bubbles are fun)
      2. Pinwheels
         1. Careful with this one. Kids tend to take shallow breathes when blowing pinwheels, trying to blow it hard and fast. Teach them to blow gently, breathing in and out evenly. Take turns with your child. While he/she is breathing in, you breathe out, to keep the pinwheel moving, and vice versa.
      3. Belly breathing
         1. Have your child lay down on his/her back. Place a lightweight object on his/her belly, such as a stuffed animal. Tell your child to see if he/she can make the object move by breathing air in and out of his/her belly.
         2. Perform this action alongside your child. Let them feel you breathe in and out. Tell them to match their breath with yours.
            1. *I don’t recommend making this a competition, because sometimes this results in a child trying to beat you, which can cause them to breathe too shallow or holding breathe for too long, which can actually exacerbate anxiety.*
         3. Sesame Street has a wonderful song for kids on belly breathing. The song is by Common and Colbie Caillat. <https://youtu.be/_mZbzDOpylA>
      4. Breathe like a ninja or dancer. Breathing training is central to martial arts and dance training. Many kids will enjoy practicing like a “ninja” (or Kung Fu master, or whatever term your kid likes) or like a “dancer,” depending on his/her interests. They can even perform a few (safe) ninja/dance moves in the process (i.e. punching in and out slowly; squatting up and down in a plié), as long as they are mainly focusing on breathing.
      5. Accordion breathing. Tell your child to imagine he/she is holding an accordion in front of them. As they breathe in, have them expand their arms as if they are opening the accordion. As they breathe out, have them squeeze the accordion slowly with their arms, coordinating their breathes with their arm movements.
      6. **In general, the more body movements you can coordinate with your breathing, the better the effect on relaxation.**
7. Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)
   1. PMR is another tried and true relaxation classic. This activity involves selectively flexing and then relaxing muscles, moving through the whole body. Many practices start at the feet and move up or at the head and move down, but the order doesn’t matter. You can even do a random order. Practice tensing muscles firmly for 5 seconds, and then relaxing for another 5 seconds.
      1. As you perform this activity, tell your child, “Let’s practice having calm bodies. We’re going to play “mad muscle, calm muscle.”” Then, teach them the game.
   2. I also often play a game called “Righty tighty, lefty loosey,” where children alternate flexing a muscle (i.e. the hand) on the right side, while loosening on the left, and then they switch. Make it into a family game where different family members choose different body parts. Children can have fun with this game by choosing body parts that are difficult to flex unilaterally (only on one side) (i.e. ear, stomach, nose, forehead, etc.). Feel free to make funny faces as you try these out, to keep the game more fun for your child.
   3. Noodle dance
      1. In this game, children make the arms and legs flail around like a wet noodle, or stiff like dry noodles. This teaches them how to relax their muscles on demand, by playing a simple game.
8. Mindfulness activities for kids
   1. I recommend the book *Sitting Still Like a Frog,* by Eline Snell. Here is a link to some select audio exercises in that book: <https://www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog>
   2. Mindfulness practice is one of the most evidence-based interventions for stress, anxiety, depression, etc. It has become more popular in recent years, but has been used for centuries in Buddhist practice. However, that does not mean that the practices require Buddhist faith. In fact, mindfulness is not tied to any particular religious belief. Anyone can do mindfulness. If you have questions about how mindfulness fits in with your current world view, please don’t hesitate to ask Dr. Steadman.
9. Make coping cards
   1. Make 3”x3” cards (about the size of a standard Post-it note) with simple reminders about coping skills. Some examples are included below. Bind the cards together with a key ring for your child to carry with them.
      1. “When I worry about [insert worry here], I will [insert skill here]”
      2. “When I worry about not having enough time to finish my test, I will take 5 deep breathes and remind myself to focus on my test-taking strategies”
      3. “It doesn’t really matter if you fail one test.”
      4. “School is for learning, not for testing. What is one thing you learned this week?”
   2. Research shows that unhappy people make statements about causes of events that are “internal, global, and stable.” In other words, if asked to say why certain bad thing happened, they say that it happened because of something they did themselves (an internal explanation), that it happens in all similar situations (global), and that it will always happen in the future (stable). Healthy statements, then, focus on external, specific, and unstable explanations. “This bad thing happened because of something I couldn’t control (external). It only happened this one time (unstable), and only in this specific instance (specific). **It helps to focus your child’s coping statements on making external, specific, unstable explanations.**
10. Create a calm down spot in your home
    1. This spot should NOT be the same as a time out spot. A time out spot removes kids from all types of feedback. In behavioral terms, it is an “extinction” procedure, meaning that the purpose is to ignore a behavior until it “dies off.” As a result, a time out spot should not have anything rewarding for your child. It should be as boring as possible. A calm down spot, on the other hand, is a direct response to an emotion or behavior designed to regulate that behavior. A calm down spot can contain any tools your child can use to regulate his or her own behaviors.
    2. When to use time out and when to use calm down
       1. Time out should only be used for bad behavior that cannot or should not be ignored – for example, aggression towards the self or others, inappropriate language, etc. For other bad behavior, if you can ignore it without timeout, then do so.
       2. Calm down is best either very early during an emotional or behavioral outburst (before a time-out behavior is displayed) or after time out. Work to help your child notice feelings early and to use calm down while they are still in control. When your child does have a bad behavior you can’t ignore (and they will eventually, which is okay), use a brief time out to allow that behavior to extinguish itself, and then follow up with calm down spot (see more on this 11.iv, below).
11. Make a coping skills toolbox/treasure chest
    1. Along with your child, create a treasure chest or toolbox in your home that your child can use at any time to practice. Place any of the activities in this handout inside the box. Set rules around the toolbox. I recommend the following rules:
       1. The child may use the toolbox at any time, without needing to ask permission and regardless of mood/emotions.
       2. The child can never lose access to the toolbox as a punishment. Thus, don’t put anything inside that you might need to later take away.
       3. No electronics/screens allowed in the toolbox. While screen-time can be a great soothing activity, it is not recommended that children have free, unmonitored access to screens. ***Everything in the toolbox should be safe for your child to access without your supervision, if they want.***
       4. It is okay for children to use the toolbox even when they’ve just had “bad” behavior. You are not rewarding bad behavior in this case. Instead, you are teaching children how to better manage their emotions. However, if your child is having bad behavior that warrants a time out, send them to time out first. When they’ve completed time out and during the “reunion” period (where you come back together and talk about what led to time out and how they can do better next time), suggest the toolbox to use in the future, and then allow the child to practice for a moment, if he/she wants.
       5. ***I also recommend a “travel version” of a coping skills toolbox. I lunchbox or small purse-sized tote works well for this. Children can bring this with them to school too, if they want.***

*For more great ideas, visit the following website:* [*https://copingskillsforkids.com/calming-anxiety/*](https://copingskillsforkids.com/calming-anxiety/)

***Special Notes for children with Illness Anxiety and/or Somatic Symptom Anxiety***

Illness Anxiety and Somatic Symptom Disorder are clinical terms used to describe children whose anxieties are primarily about body symptoms and/or illness. They are two different disorders with subtle, but important differences, but for our purposes here we’ll discuss them together. Both disorders most often involve children who become very anxious about common aches and pains (illness anxiety) or who turn their psychological stress into body stress (somatic symptom disorder). **It’s *very* common for children (and adults too) to show their stress by complaining of headaches, stomachaches, or other illness**. For these children, some types of coping skills and relaxation training can cause them to become more anxious if not careful. Some of the activities above, like PMR, mindfulness, and deep breathing can cause uncomfortable body sensations that, if not well prepared, children with Somatic anxiety can find anxiety-provoking. For this reason, you may consider having a trained professional assist you and your child with implementing relaxation training with your child. While these above techniques are still helpful, there are additional adaptations that can be especially helpful with Somatic or Illness-related anxiety.