



## Kris' Corner:

A Series of Articles by Parenting Expert

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### Physical Reactions to Stress

**"Mom! I can't go to school, I have a stomach ache!"**

Many parents wake up to this familiar refrain. I remember the words rushing through my brain upon hearing this, "Oh no! Here we go again!" You think about how bright and perky they were just the day before and then you remember, "Oh, yeah, today's Monday."

I've had parents say to me, "My child's a liar." Upon questioning why they think so, I'll hear about how this happens over and over again. How they sometimes get a call from the school to come get their child, only to have him or her restored to perfect health upon walking in the front door! Really? Come on ... ! They feel manipulated and angry that their child has misrepresented the situation. In other words, "lied." It sure seems that way.

So first let me share with you some information about how the body reacts to stress. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta estimates that 75% of all diseases are "stress related." Our emotional health effects our physical health. Physiologically our bodies register negative emotions. Our stomachs in particular are very sensitive to the stress hormones that our bodies release (such as adrenaline and cortisol). This is why we can't eat when we feel nervous, why it seems like we have "butterflies" in our stomach before going onstage, or why we talk about how our stomach was in "knots" while we were having that job interview.

Children also are susceptible to those stress hormones. Children encounter so many things in school that are stressful. We tend to take for granted that school is school. But if a child is particularly sensitive to loud voices, a teacher yelling at another child who is misbehaving can be very stressful. Even if she is not the target of the teacher's anger, she may say to herself, "Oh, no, when am I going to do the wrong thing and be the one who gets yelled at?" Or if a child is having a difficult time socially, he might feel very upset over being left out on the playground. A child who is a perfectionist may stress over the next test that they have to take. The chaos and noise of the school bus or the lunch room can effect a child's nervous system, and BINGO—a stomach ache!

Conversely, upon being rescued at school from the nurse's office and walking in the front door, the child relaxes, those stress hormones subside and magically, no stomachache! The point is that the physical discomfort your child may report to you, may not necessarily be an illness. It may be the *temporary* body reaction to stress. So they are not actually misrepresenting or lying about how they feel. Their stomach REALLY does hurt, while they are under stress anyway!

What is the answer to this dilemma? First, trust that your child is trying to convey something to you that is troubling them. Unfortunately, often *they* don't even know, themselves, why they are upset. Exploring with them the possible things they might be worried about is a good first step. Instead of approaching them from a, "you-better-be-telling-me-the-truth" point of view, you will probably have much more success by "playing detective" with them to help them learn about their own feelings and subsequent bodily reactions.

Secondly, the more ways that we can teach our children to calm themselves down and feel safe in their bodies, the more we prepare them for the tough situations they're bound to encounter. These tools for "self-regulation" are essential. Whether it's deep breathing, imagery, positive self-talk, etc., these skills can help our children cope with their overwhelming physical sensations.

I will dedicate another article to these different tools, but for now, try this: Have your child cross their arms across their chest. Now ask them to tap their shoulders left, right, left, right, as they feel their feelings (this is called the "Butterfly Hug" and was a tool taught to the children in Indonesia who were traumatized by the Tsunami a few

years ago). Let them continue until their difficult feelings subside. Much the same effect can be realized in school, discreetly, by just tapping their toes left, right, left, right. Try the Butterfly Hug at night, if your child is having trouble falling asleep. They may first have to articulate their feelings, but shortly thereafter their body should relax and allow for sleep to come.

When we help our children recognize stress and teach them tools for calming themselves down, we go a long way towards empowering them to be secure, independent and confident individuals. When they discover that they hold the key to helping themselves get through an upsetting situation, they build confidence and positive self-esteem. And because we have supported them and joined them in the mission to figure this all out, we feel closer to our children and they trust us more than ever. The parent/child relationship is strengthened and our child knows that they can come to us for assistance and guidance. A recipe for success.

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