

What to do when....



Your child complains of an upset stomach

What to do when your child repeatedly says, "my stomach hurts":

- Go to your doctor and rule out any physical concerns. It may be constipation or lactose intolerance, but it also may be stress.
- Stomach aches caused by stress may be called "psychosomatic" because they are triggered by thoughts. Although the cause may not be physical, the pain is real.
- Start tracking the days and times your child complains of a stomach ache. Notice any patterns. When do the stomach aches happen? Is there anything else going on at that time?
- The challenges may be academic or social. Gently ask if there is anything your child may find worrisome at school (see below for suggested questions). This could be friendships, difficulty with schoolwork, or a problem with a staff member. Sometimes kids can't really pinpoint a reason, though, so don't press too hard for information.
- If your child does express a concern at school, your first step is to discuss this with the classroom teacher.
- Remember to show empathy. Your child wants to know that you heard them and you know the pain is real.
- Share with your child how you manage your own stress and the strategies you use.
- Try not to avoid school. If the stomach ache is stress related and your child stays home, it may make them more anxious about going to school the next day.
- Your nervous system talks to your child's nervous system. Remember to self-regulate and show your child that you believe in them and that they can handle the struggles they face.

What can you say?

- "I understand that sometimes school can feel tough, and it might make you want to stay home. Can you tell me what's been hard for you? We can talk about it and try to come up with some ideas to make things easier!"
- "I'm surprised to hear that you're feeling tired. I assumed you were getting enough rest. Is there something specific you've been putting extra effort into, or something that's been draining your energy? Sometimes, even just worrying can be exhausting."
- "I know there are many things you like about school. Is there something that's making you unhappy that you want to stay home?"
- "I'm sorry kids are being mean. Can you tell me more about this? Let's come up with some things you can try."
- "It seems like things aren't going so great at school. What's the most difficult thing about school right now?"
- "You seem to be having trouble staying on top of your work. Do you agree? Let's try some ways to help you stay organized."
- "What is the hardest thing you are working on?"
- "Who are you playing with at recess and lunch? What are you doing?"

What can your child do to ease the pain?

- Teach your child about the "Magic Triangle". This is a CBT strategy where we learn that our feelings, thoughts and actions are all connected and by changing one of these areas, the other areas will also change.
- Changing your thoughts: your child may have "red" thoughts that cause their worries to grow bigger. They can change these thoughts into "green" thoughts that cause us to feel better.
 - Change "I can't handle this" to "this is hard, but I can get through it."
 - Change "she will be mean to me today" to "if she says something mean, I know what I can do."
 - Change "math is too hard" to "if I don't understand the math, I will ask for help."
- Change your actions. If your child's stomach starts to hurt, they can....
 - take deep breaths and send positive energy to the part of their stomach that hurts. Deep breaths can make our whole body feel better.
 - Ask their teacher if they can go get a drink or water or walk to the bathroom. Moving our bodies causes the anxious feelings to be released.
 - Make sure they get exercise at recess and lunch - exercise and exerting our bodies can help us feel better.
 - Sitting still for a few minutes and focusing on the air moving in and out of our noses can calm us and give us strength.
 - Write out some affirmation cards that they can read. The cards can say things like, "You are strong." "I love you and I believe in you." "I will give you a big hug after school."
 - Eat something, even if it is just a little snack and drink water. Sometimes kids won't eat if their stomach hurts which only makes them feel worse and can impact their learning.
 - Talk to a close friend, a teacher or the school counsellor about how you are feeling. Being around supportive people make us feel better.
- Change your feelings. Well, we can't actually directly change our feelings, but notice how your feelings change when you change your thoughts and/or actions.