Healthy Coping Skills

By Justyna Wawrzonek, L.M.S.W., CdLS Foundation Family Service Coordinator

Impacts of Stress on Parents, Caretakers and Families

Parents and caretakers of children with CdLS are likely to experience increased stress due to the challenging realities of raising a child with special needs. They may often find themselves juggling the daily needs of their family with medical appointments, school meetings and advocating for services, in addition to the many other demanding tasks associated with caring for their family.

Parents and caretakers may also be burdened with financial pressures, as not all services are covered by insurance. Siblings may experience a heightened level of stress due to feeling overlooked or overly relied upon, as well.

Stress can impact our health and can greatly affect our relationships with partners, friends and, most importantly, our children. Parents and caretakers of children with CdLS and other disabilities may often feel isolated in their experiences. It is crucial that they take time to recharge and relax, especially in times of high stress.

Adapted from www.abilitypath.org

Healthy Ways to Cope with Stress

1. Practice mindfulness
2. Take time for yourself
3. Express and share your feelings
4. Take care of your own health
5. Ask for what you need
6. Accept help
7. Utilize respite care
8. Focus on things you can control
9. Seek support from other parents and caretakers
10. Seek support from a professional

Adapted from www.abilitypath.org

Characteristics of Positive Coping

1. Strong spousal relationship
2. Positive self-esteem
3. Being proactive
4. Acceptance of the reality of child’s disability
5. Positive thinking
6. Seeking information and resources
7. Accepting help
8. Being an active advocate

9. Seeking social support
10. Focus on internal locus of control
11. Taking direct action to change the situation
12. Validation of one’s feelings
13. Gaining a sense of empowerment through helping others
14. Taking pride in child’s accomplishments

Adapted from the British Journal of Developmental Disabilities

Tips for Parents and Caretakers of a Child with CdLS

- Learn as much as you can about CdLS
- Know your child’s triggers
- Understand what soothes and calms your child
- Find programs and services to help your child
- Talk about how you’re feeling
- Don’t compare your child to other children
- Join a support group
- Be consistent
- Stick to a daily routine
- Reward positive behavior
- Take it one day at a time
- Create a “safe zone” for your child
- Celebrate child’s successes
- Love and accept your child for who they are

Adapted from www.womenshealth.gov

Helping Your Child Develop Coping Skills

Providing your child with healthy tools for coping may also have a positive impact on your wellbeing. Giving your child tools for healthy emotion regulation can reduce some stress that is associated with your child’s challenging behaviors as they learn to implement healthy coping skills.

1. *Give Words to Feelings*
   Strong emotions can be scary for children, and they can fuel strong reactions. When children are able to express their emotions through a healthy outlet, their emotions may feel more manageable.
   - When your child is upset offer him/her words to use such as mad, sad, frustrated, anxious, and embarrassed. If your child is non-verbal, you can offer a picture representation of emotions and allow your child to identify the emotion.
   - Ask your child to tell or show you where he or she is feeling the emotions in the body.

2. *Find Your Child's Triggers*
   Think about which situations are toughest for your child. Children with disabilities generally have specific "triggers" such as words, images or sounds that signal danger or disruption to their feelings of safety and security. Children tend to develop their own "cues" in response to these triggers. Parents and caregivers can learn how to "read" these cues to understand when the child is having difficulty. These cues may include facial expression or nervous tics, changes in speech patterns, sweating, feeling ill, becoming quiet or withdrawn, complaining or getting irritable, exhibiting a fear or avoidance response, etc.

   When you anticipate your child's triggers or observe these cues, it is important to provide your child with assurance, support and attention. If cues are missed, children may escalate their behavior to a point where they completely lose control.

   It may also be helpful to consider how you can change your behavior to help your child cope. For example, if your child's stress increases as you get dressed each morning, a picture schedule may be helpful for your child to anticipate what's next.

   It is also essential that parents, caregivers, teachers, and all other professionals who spend time with the child work together to share information about his or her cues and triggers.

3. *Encourage Healthy Ways of Coping*
   Think about all the things your child already does to feel good. When you see your child getting upset, point out the coping skills he or she can use, such as holding a toy or blanket that elicits comfort, listening to music or other calming activities. Over time your child may turn to these coping skills on their own.

   Keep in mind that a crucial part of how children learn to manage their emotions is through modeling. How adults express and mange their emotions will influence the reaction of a child.

4. *Brainstorm Specific Coping Strategies*
   If your child doesn't already have particular activities that calm him or her down, help your child develop ideas. Remind them of these when you begin to notice your child's "cues".

5. *Be Present and Understanding*
   When your child feels emotional, give him or her your full attention. If your child sees you distracted, he or she may feel even more upset. Being present, offering your full attention, practicing active listening through restating what your child has shared, and asking related questions are helpful ways to help your child manage his or her emotions.

6. *Seek Help When Needed*
   When you rely on others for help, you show your child that there are many components to a healthy coping strategy. Connecting with parents, professionals and other resources in your community are a few ways you can obtain help and support, as well as model a healthy way of coping for your child.

Adapted from www.understood.org and www.naspoonline.com

Tips for Non-Verbal Coping
Teaching your child healthy coping skills does not have to rely on language as the form of communication for expressing feelings and emotions. You communicate with your child by the way you look, they way you touch, the tone of your voice, and your body language. Your child is also communicating to you in many non-verbal ways. It is important to learn and understand your child's language in order to best help them cope.

1. *Look for non-verbal cues.* Observe the kinds of sounds your child makes, the facial expressions and the gestures he or she uses when tired, hungry, etc.

2. *Figure out the need behind the tantrum.* When non-verbal children act out, it is often because you are not acknowledging their non-verbal cues. They feel misunderstood or even ignored. Throwing a tantrum or demonstrating other challenging behaviors is their way of communicating their frustration and getting your attention.

3. *Make time for fun.* A child coping with CdLS needs more to life than medical care, therapy and other clinical services. It is important to figure out ways to have fun as well. Think about the things that make your child smile, laugh and become outgoing. There are tremendous benefits that result from enjoying your child's company and from your child's enjoyment of spending unpressured time with you. Play is an essential part of learning and should not feel like work.

4. *Pay attention to your child's sensory activities.* Some children with CdLS are hypersensitive to light, sound, taste, and smell. Other children are under-sensitive to sensory stimuli. It is important to figure out what sensations trigger your child and what elicits a positive response. This understanding can help manage stressful situations and create a more positive experience for yourself and your child.

Adapted from www.helpguide.org