

Back to School

Is there too much pressure?

Children approach the beginning of the new school year with all kinds of feelings – and so do parents. As parents, we feel like we need to push, inspire, or motivate our children to make a fresh start -- a new opportunity to excel. Maybe it's in the classroom, on the athletic field, in peer/social situations, or in music/drama performances. Some kids are great at repelling these messages and others really take it to heart – maybe more than we had intended.

*Think of the child who worries excessively: “What if I am not good enough?” “What if I lose?”
“What if my teacher gets mad at me?”*

Or the child who seems to be too hard on him/herself – staying up late to prepare for a test and ending up too tired in the morning to do well: “I am dumb; I am a failure; I can never do anything right.”

Or the shy child who auditions for the school play... and doesn't get chosen: “Nobody likes me; everyone laughed at me; I just want to disappear.”

If there is a child in your life who sounds like this, you probably have had moments of concern, especially when there appears to be significant emotional distress. What can you do?

American culture tends to value individual achievements; and to attribute personal success to extraordinary efforts -- not so much to the people who help us; or the circumstances that work in our favor. In some ways, there is nothing wrong with success on a test or a winning race. However, when the messages are amplified and intensified, a child can begin to feel a real sense of burden, turning inward to ask, “What's wrong with me?” Instead of outward to ask, “Who can help me?”

So how do we know if there is a problem?

Self-talk is a term borrowed from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). It is the internal dialogue one has about a situation or dilemma. Sometimes, it is literally talking aloud – we might hear our children say things like: “I'm a failure” or “Nobody likes me”. Maybe they aren't talking at all but you notice the outward manifestations: tears, stomach aches, reluctance to go to school, trouble sleeping.

“The first step is to listen for self-talk – or to elicit it if you are not hearing it,” says Project Harmony Clinical Director Barbara Jessing. “Find a quiet time to explore. The ride home from school, working in the kitchen side by side, or the quiet time before bed are good opportunities. Self-talk gives us clues to

how the child has made sense of what's happening, or in what ways he/she is *stuck* with an overly negative, critical, or irrational explanation."

"The next step is a little more difficult," says Jessing. "Look for ways to help the child calm down so they can think more clearly and in balance with their emotions."

Do not try to talk the child out of their negative expressions; or cheer them up. Listen carefully for understanding. Say it back. "Here's what I'm hearing. Am I right?"

Then, help the child to evaluate the self-talk statements. Test their accuracy and look for exceptions. Could it be true that NO ONE likes you? Are you sure you are *dumb* about everything? In CBT we have a term called **HOT** – *Helpful Other Thoughts*. It's an invitation used to revise some of the negative self-talk, substituting more adaptive and effective words of encouragement: "I can do OK with math if I slow down and do all the steps." Create reminders and encouragements to the child using *helpful other thoughts*.

Finally, listen to your own self-talk, your inner and outer dialogue as a parent or caregiver to this child. Parenting expert Peggy O'Mara has said, "The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice." Do you need to revise or tone down your messages, especially for the child who is sensitive, and who may be feeling a far stronger impact of your words? It's great to challenge our kids, striving for excellence. Help them find their internal "mojo" – to feel it as something they can activate, rather than needing the constant "push" from a parent or teacher. This school year try to keep an eye on the pressure gauge.

#

ABOUT PROJECT HARMONY

Project Harmony is a nonprofit, community-based organization in Omaha, Nebraska, that has served more than 32,000 children during the past 21 years by providing a child friendly environment in which specially-trained professionals work together to assess, investigate, and resolve child abuse cases. In a nationally unique model, Project Harmony has one centralized location that co-houses with Omaha Police Department Child Victim/Sexual Assault Unit, Nebraska Health & Human Services/Child Protection Service Initial Assessment and Child Abuse Hotline, Lutheran Family Services and Child Saving Institute. Project Harmony exists to protect and support children, collaborate with professionals and engage the community to end child abuse and neglect.