



ASK DR. DANA

Q. Why does my 13 year old get so emotional and overwhelmed about everything? She's only in middle school.

A. The number one complaint we hear from kids is that parents pooh-pooh their fears, concerns, and stressors. Many parents' think that since they survived middle and high school unscathed, so can their kids. They also compare all of the stress and responsibility they face in their adult lives with their children's stress and come to the conclusion that their children don't have anything to be stressed about. In other words, their children's lives are simple compared to their own (what does Billy really have to worry about?)

What these well meaning parents fail to take into consideration is that stress is relative and feels real and overwhelming to their child. Adolescents don't "experience" their situation from an adults' perspective or by comparing their level of stress to an adult's. They can't.

Cognitively speaking, children's frontal cortex isn't fully developed until age 23. So, your 13 year olds' brain is only half as developed as an adult brain. They can't see solutions or manage their emotions the way an adult can.

Although their objective degree of stress may be less than an adult's, they don't experience their situation as less stressful. They feel the pressure to achieve, perform, fit-in, and form connections with others, as strongly, if not more strongly than adults.

They need help; your help. If you aren't willing to really listen to and validate their concerns and stressors, guess what? They will turn away from you and towards their friends who are going through similar emotions. The problem here is that other teens are as emotionally ill-equipped to deal with their stress as your child.

To teach your children how to manage stress start by listening and validating their specific concerns, struggles, and fears. Teaching them how to prioritize, manage their time, and confront peer conflicts will reduce their level of stress. Similarly, role playing peer conflict situations with your children can provide the self-confidence they need to stand up for themselves or begin a difficult emotional conversation.