



Help your child learn  
to handle pain with  
emotional support.

# When Your Child Cries

IT'S HARD FOR ADULTS TO COPE WITH PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT, BUT EVEN HARDER WHEN YOU SEE YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCING IT. HERE'S HOW TO SEE WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON AND HOW TO MAKE IT ALL SEEM BETTER. **by** DIANA KELLY

**A**s a parent, there's no feeling more helpless than seeing your child in pain. But physical discomfort is something we all go through, even at an early age—and it's a necessary part of life. "No one wants anyone to suffer, especially a child, but pain is normal. It protects us from further loss [or injury]," explains Ron Litman, D.O., an anesthesiologist at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "Kids have to develop internal coping mechanisms to deal with pain—after all, no one will escape pain in their life." We asked pediatric pain experts for their top advice on how to better understand how children experience pain, and the best ways to help them handle it.

## HOW KIDS EXPERIENCE PAIN

Whether a toddler, teen or 20-something, we all actually experience pain in a similar fashion, notes clinical-based researcher Katherine S. Salamon, Ph.D., who works in the Integrated Pain and Wellness Program at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, in Wilmington, Delaware. "There's not a physiological or a biological difference in how kids or adults feel pain. It's in the expression of that pain that you see a difference."

It's important to think of pain as a learning experience, especially among younger children, says Sal-

amon. For example, if you touch a hot stove, that shooting pain in your fingers is part of the automatic reflex sequence that tells you to move your hand, pronto. But how you interpret that event can differ drastically depending on your age, and the response you receive. "If I get a big reaction from my parent when I touch something hot, I may become more sensitive to pain than someone else who didn't have that same experience," said Salamon.

## HOW MUCH DOES IT HURT?

The acute pain that comes with scraping a knee or bumping a head is

a typical event for most children, and rites of passage we all go through when we're growing up. But chronic pain, which is persistent and recurring, is less common among children and can be more disturbing. The most common types of chronic pain in children tend to be musculoskeletal, headaches and abdominal pain. About 20 to 35 percent of children and adolescents are affected by some form of chronic pain worldwide.

"Pain is very subjective," says Salamon. Your pain might be a 6 on a scale of 1 to 10, but that 6 might be different from your partner's, your doctor's or your child's. "I know what my '6' feels like but I have no idea what someone else's '6' feels like," adds Salamon. That becomes hard, especially when you're in that situation of 'Does my child need medical assistance?' It becomes a tricky thing to navigate."

Younger children often do better with nonverbal cues. For example, at the Pain Clinic at Nemours/Alfred I.



## TREATING THEIR PAIN

# FEELING THE OUCH

Although pain might have the same biological basis, kids react in different ways depending on their age. Treating pain can be especially challenging for children who aren't old enough to speak, so parents need to be aware of their child's reaction and response. "Reach out to your pediatrician if you feel like your child is not acting as he or she typically would," says Katherine S. Salamon, Ph.D.



### INFANTS

**SIGNS OF PAIN** Crying, being inconsolable with care that would normally make him or her calm or

happy. Other signs include crying that's insistent and may be higher-pitched; making faces (grimaces, wrinkling brow, scrunching face); body posture that seems tense or stiff; legs pulled in or stretched out; not eating, nursing or sleeping well.

**SOOTHE** Try calming activities like swaddling, rocking or holding your infant, playing music, singing or distracting her with something else.

**WHEN TO GET HELP** If your infant is still in distress, it might be a sign that something else is going on that is causing pain. This is the time to call your pediatrician.



### TODDLERS

**SIGNS OF PAIN** Persistent crying, general fussiness, atypical behavior

**SOOTHE** Remain calm. "Children look to their parents to help them understand how to navigate the world, and that includes pain," she adds. "If your toddler fell and you have a big reaction, then the child is probably going to notice more pain, since they may be scared and trying to figure out what's going on." Try giving him some encouragement and say, 'OK, let's get a Band-Aid and get you back to playing,' rather than focusing on the incident or the potential pain, suggests Salamon. If the situation warrants it, use an ice pack or cold compress on any bumps or bruises.

**WHEN TO GET HELP** If your child gets back to playing without incident, it's likely the pain or discomfort will be short-lived. But if she's limping or acting out of the ordinary, describe the injury and your child's response to your pediatrician,

advises Salamon. Parents often worry a fall or bumped head may signal a concussion. If your child has hit his head, it's important to monitor his behavior. If he is acting lethargic or tired, having difficulty transitioning to the next activity, and/or crying inconsolably, get in touch with your doctor. "If you're at the point where you're thinking about it, it's always good to speak with the pediatrician just to review some of the signs and get more information."



### ADOLESCENTS OR TEENS

**SIGNS OF PAIN** Older children are pretty adept at communicating whether they are in pain. Ask them

where it hurts, how much, and if something happened to cause the pain or if it gradually built up. You should ask specific questions like, 'Can you get up?' 'Can you walk?' 'Does it hurt more when I touch this area?' "Try to find out what they are experiencing, as well as addressing any potential questions they're going to be asked when they see a medical provider," says Salamon.

**SOOTHE** Even older kids need reassurance, so acknowledge that you know they are in pain, it's temporary, and that you are getting them help—and don't overreact, either.

**WHEN TO GET HELP** If your child plays a sport or suffers any sort of head injury, it pays to be extra cautious. Up to 20 percent of teens develop concussions, although most do not experience long-term difficulties from the injury. Just give them time to heal: One recent study found that female athletes who suffered concussions tended to require a lengthier recovery period than their male counterparts. Another study found girls' recoveries tended to average more than twice as long (28 days) than boys' (11 days average).

duPont Hospital for Children, young children can identify their pain with a face-based scale, picking which smiley or grimacing face best matches how they feel. (Nurses then also write what the child's face looks like on the same scale.) "That helps us understand subjective versus objective level of pain," says Salamon. You can follow that same template, and draw faces for your child, ranging from smiley to neutral and sad if your child is having difficulty reporting pain, she notes. Use the information your child communicates to better understand how much pain she's in.

### IS HE FAKING IT?

How much is that bellyache really hurting your son and how much of it is due to that math test he has tomorrow? Medical experts caution that if a child says he is in pain, he probably is experiencing discomfort. "There might be other underlying experiences or reasons for that experience of pain but when a child is saying he or she is hurting, we know that they're hurting," says Salamon. Look for clues: Is he missing every Monday of school? Does she want to leave early to miss a class that's happening on Tuesdays and Thursdays? Are there certain social or sporting activities that he tends to say he's in pain before attending? "See if there are any patterns that come up when a youth is reporting pain often," says Salamon.

If you think the pain is more situational than biological, be empathetic. "Say, 'I know you're not feeling well this morning. School's really important so we're going to get you there and if you need to call and come home, we can do that,'" suggests Salamon.

Bottom line: If you're not sure what level of pain your child is experiencing, call your pediatrician and discuss the symptoms. If you're concerned that it's serious, take your child to get help.



## COMMON CAUSES OF PAIN IN KIDS

**BACKPACKS** Lugging around 20 pounds of books, computers, lunch and more can trigger back pain or muscle strain. Medical professionals often suggest children's backpacks shouldn't weigh more than 10 to 15 percent of their body weight. If they absolutely must lug around all that stuff, get them a rolling bag.

**TABLETS AND SCREENS** Too much screen time can cause digital eye strain and headaches. The American Optometric Association (AOA) 2015 American Eye-Q survey found that 41 percent of parents say their kids spend three or more hours per day using digital devices. Limit your child's screen time, keep in mind their technology use if they complain about headaches, and make sure to get an annual eye exam to help detect vision trouble.

**UTIS** If your child says it hurts when she goes to the bathroom, it could be a urinary tract infection. UTIs cause pain and burning during urination, which can also lead to pain in the abdomen. More than 1.3 million children are treated annually for the condition.

**CONSTIPATION** Stomach cramps or aches and difficulty going to the bathroom are typical signs of constipation. Make sure your child is drinking a lot of water and eats more fruits and veggies. If the pain starts by the belly button and moves to the lower right side of the abdomen, it might be appendicitis. Talk to your pediatrician and see if she recommends taking your child in for examination or to the hospital.

**Worldwide, up to 35 percent of kids are affected by chronic pain.**