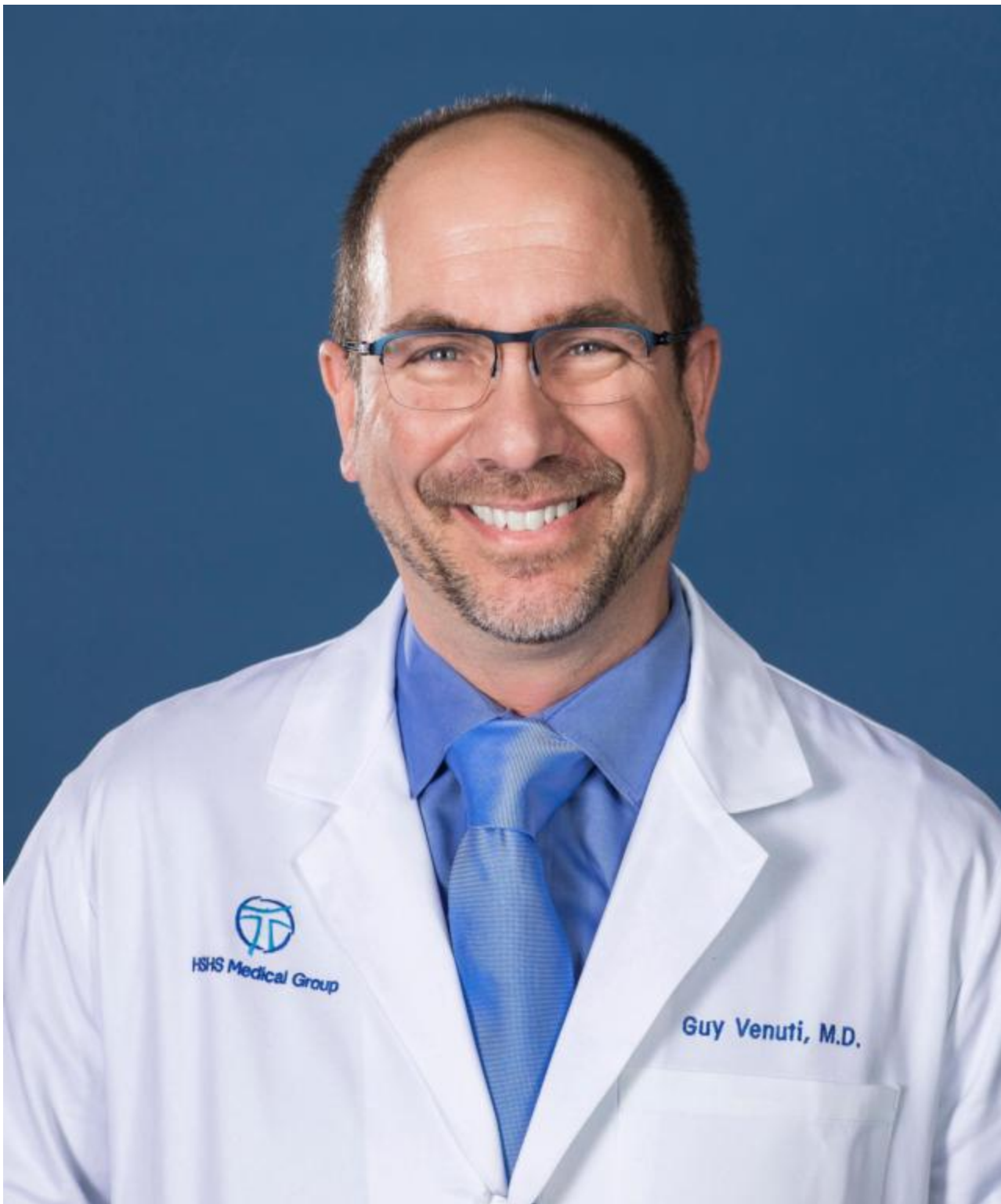




How to Help Children Cope with Stress, Anxiety

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HIGHLAND - As the United States enters the sixth month of the COVID-19 pandemic, children are facing additional stress related to back-to-school, fall sports, or lack thereof, and many new routines. Managing the stress and anxiety of so much change looks different for each child within each family.

The HSHS Illinois hospitals including HSHS St. John's Hospital in Springfield; HSHS St. Mary's Hospital in Decatur; HSHS St. Francis Hospital in Litchfield; HSHS Good

Shepherd Hospital in Shelbyville; HSHS St. Elizabeth's Hospital in O'Fallon, HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital in Effingham; HSHS Holy Family Hospital in Greenville, and HSHS St. Joseph's Hospitals in Breese and Highland want to offer advice for parents and caregivers in navigating stress and anxiety in children.

Dr. Guy Venuti, HSHS Medical Group pediatrician, emphasizes the importance of making sure children are appropriately handling stress.

“Kids may not be capable of expressing their feelings or knowing the right words to describe how they're feeling, so it's really important to get to their level and ask questions they will know how to answer,” he says.

Examples of those questions include, “Tell me what was good and what was bad about your day today,” and “What kinds of things are you worried about right now?”

The American Psychological Association (APA) offers the following tips to recognize if children may be experiencing stress or anxiety:

- Withdrawal from things the child usually enjoys
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Unexpected abdominal pain or headaches
- Extreme mood swings
- Development of a nervous habit, such as nail-biting

Parents can actively help kids and adolescents manage stress by:

Being available

- Start the conversation to let kids know you care about what's happening in their lives.
- Notice times when kids are most likely to talk – for example, in the car or before bed.

Listening actively

- Stop what you're doing and listen carefully when a child begins to open up about their feelings or thoughts.
- Let kids complete their point before you respond.
- Listen to their point of view even if it's difficult to hear.

Responding thoughtfully

- Resist arguing about who is right. Instead say “I know you disagree with me, but this is what I think.”
- Express your opinion without minimizing theirs – acknowledge that it’s healthy to disagree sometimes.
- Focus on kids’ feelings rather than your own during conversation.
- Soften strong reactions, as kids will tune you out if you appear angry, defensive or judgmental.
- Word swap.

o Say ‘and’ instead of ‘but’

o Say ‘could’ instead of ‘should’

o Say ‘aren’t going to’ instead of ‘can’t’

o Say ‘sometimes’ instead of ‘never’ or ‘always’

Consider

- Model the behavior you want children to follow in how they manage anger, solve problems and work through difficult feelings. Kids learn by watching their parents.
- Don’t feel you have to step in each time kids make what you may consider a bad decision, unless the consequences may be dangerous. Kids learn from making their own choices.
- Pay attention to how children play, the words they use or the activities they engage in. Young children may express their feelings of stress during play time when they feel free to be themselves.
- It is important to explain difficult topics in sentences and even individual words kids will understand. For little kids it might mean saying simple things like, “We love you and we are here to keep you safe.” For adolescents, it’s important to be honest and up front about difficult topics and then give them a little space to process the information and ask questions when they’re ready.

Call your child’s or adolescent’s health care provider if stress begins to interfere with his or her daily activities for several days in a row.

Find additional helpful information about kids and stress by visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Helping Children Cope webpage at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/for-parents.html>.