

Family Resource

Helping Your Child "Right Size" A Problem

How Big is the Problem: Ant, Sheep, or Elephant?

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ages: 3+



ongoing skill

Skills Practiced

Identifying emotions, perspective-taking, self-regulation, and empathy.

The Why

One way to help your child develop perspective about stressful situations is to teach them to consider the size of a problem in relation to other stressors they have faced (or can imagine). Conversations about the size of the problem present an opportunity to talk about how feelings are temporary and how challenging emotions will abate over time.

The How

What does it mean to "right size" a problem? When is the best time to teach your child?

Right-sizing a problem means helping your child develop perspective about the fact that there are many different types of stressful situations in life, and thinking about them in relation to other stressors often helps put things in context. This strategy is most effective if introduced when your child is calm and able to converse.

Play the "How big is the problem" game:

You and your child take turns imagining tricky situations and rating them on a scale of ant, sheep, or elephant-sized problems (see images below). You could also use a 5-point or create a visual scale by moving hands together or apart to indicate a large, medium, or small problem. Everyone's scale is different, and talking about your ratings and how they differ from your child's helps build empathy.

What are examples of tricky situations you might rate with your child?

- Falling off your bike or scooter and getting hurt.
- Accidentally spilling your water at the dinner table.
- Losing your pencil.
- Finding out you weren't invited to a classmate's birthday party.
- Being cut from a team.
- Auditioning for a lead in the play and being cast in the ensemble.
- Studying hard for a test but getting a low grade.

Take it Further

Model problem-solving and discuss strategies you use to help manage stressful situations. Example: "I know it was an accident, but I felt bad when I spilled a big glass of water on the floor. Then I remembered, 'I can just get a dishcloth and clean this up'. Now the problem doesn't feel so big."

Teach children coping statements for managing stressful situations.

Example: "I don't like this situation, but I can handle it." Or: "This isn't what I wanted, but I'll survive."