

Tip Sheets

Children Experiencing Stress



Like adults, a certain amount of stress for children is normal—and necessary for survival.

Positive stress, such as getting a shot from the doctor with a parent nearby to comfort, helps children develop the skills they need to cope with- and adapt to new and potentially threatening situations throughout life.

Support from parents and other primary caregivers is essential for children to learn how to respond to stress in a physically and emotionally healthy way.

The benefits of stress diminish when it is severe enough to overwhelm a child's ability to cope effectively and is then referred to as toxic stress.

How Do Children Experience Stress?

Typical development

Children experience stress throughout the course of their typical ongoing physical, emotional, social, language, and cognitive development.

- For example, toilet training: This is a big change for children and is not always easy! Both parents and child can experience frustration throughout the process.

Family stressors

Some stressors will come from what is going on in the child's family. It may be typical or atypical changes, but they still represent uncertainty and change for a child.

- For example, a new baby: A new baby, while a joyful event, can cause a sibling to feel a range

of feelings including jealousy, uncertainty, and happiness.

- Once the baby is home, but a routine is not yet established, the inconsistencies can cause an older child to feel out-of-sync and insecure.

Stress in The Early Childhood Setting

The early childhood setting can cause stress for children in a number of ways. For example:

- **Inconsistent caregiving:** When staff change frequently, children can develop feelings of insecurity and anxiety without a primary caregiver to depend on.
- **Sensory overload:** Too much input coming into a child's sensory system can increase anxiousness, including lots of smells or noises. Even teachers using loud voices too frequently can raise a child's arousal state.
- **Frequent transitions:** Lots of movement from activity to activity without an opportunity to engage in meaningful play, or change from engaged play, can cause turmoil for a young child. Too many transitions can cause feelings of insecurity and anxiousness.

Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma is well-documented as harmful to children in their ongoing development.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Young children depend exclusively on parents/caregivers for survival and protection—both physical and emotional. When trauma also impacts the parent/caregiver, the relationship between that person and the child may be strongly affected."

Early Childhood Practices that Decrease Stress in Children

Caregivers can help decrease stress in children by:

- Establishing stable, emotional relationships with primary caregivers
- Displaying active involvement in coping
- Providing social support
- Teaching problem-solving skills
- Utilizing rituals, stories, and traditions

Trauma includes but is not limited to:

- Violence
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Bullying
- Natural disasters
- Medical procedures
- Illness
- Sudden loss of a primary caregiver

How Children Communicate They Are Experiencing Stress

Children may be telling us their stress is overwhelming when they consistently:

- Are overactive
- Cannot focus on or complete work
- Become easily frustrated
- Cannot make decisions
- Solve peer problems with aggression
- Have tantrums
- Cling to adults
- Avoid new challenges
- Do not play with other children
- Cry frequently
- Do not eat

Strategies That Promote a Sense of Well-Being for All Children

Caregivers can promote a sense of well-being in the child care environment by:

- Ensuring the safety and security of all children in your setting
- Using responsive caregiving strategies that encourage trust-building and attachment
- Using calming practices with a child who may have trouble with fearfulness
- Adjusting your environment for all children—but especially for those who may seem worried or insecure
- Building a sense of community and belonging within the child care program for each child
- Knowing where to refer parents for early intervention services

Additional Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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