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### Stress In Young Children

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#### **LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER**

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Stress is how the body reacts when confronted with a physical or emotional situation that alters life's normal balance, or that presents change. Another way to describe stress is "pressure on the outside that causes pressure on the inside." While the early childhood years are often thought of as lighthearted and happy-go-lucky, even the youngest children can be affected physically, emotionally, and behaviorally by stress.

Change is a constant in life, and children are more vulnerable than adults because they have less understanding and control of their worlds. Stress can be physical, like an uncomfortable temperature or a painful injury, or psychological, like feeling ignored, neglected, or rejected. Some stress is a normal and expected part of life.

Stressors can be positive, like moving from a crib to a "big bed" or promotion to a new age level in preschool. Other stressors, like homelessness, natural disasters, or family violence, are negative. Whether stress is positive or negative, when it is prolonged, overwhelming, or unmanageable, it can become a problem.

### Stress in the Childcare Setting

A caring and consistent childcare environment is an important part of a child's support system, and understanding the causes and symptoms of stress will make you both more effective and more comfortable when dealing with a stressed child.

Like adults, children have different personalities and temperaments, so what stresses one child may have little effect on another. Children who are ill or have developmental delays or physical challenges may be more susceptible to stress. If children have a predictable, stable, and emotionally and physically nurturing environment, then any form of loss (inconsistent routines, inadequate sleep, or improper nutrition) will cause them less stress.

Negative events that affect the family, like poverty, divorce, or the illness or death of a relative or pet, cause children stress. Positive family events, like the birth of a sibling or a birthday party, also can be stressful for young children.

Family events that adults consider positive, such as a career promotion that requires the family to relocate, may cause children tremendous stress because it represents apparent disruption in the predictable world.

### Stress Clues

Even normal growth and development can be stressful for children. Skills of independence, like self-feeding, toilet training, and separating from the parent can cause a young child stress, as can social development of skills like sharing and taking turns. Like adults, children also can be stressed by events covered by the media, such as war, famine, and natural disaster.

Generally, children's behavior offers clues to whether they are stressed. Some children may become increasingly aggressive when stressed, while others may become more

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withdrawn. Sometimes it is challenging to accurately detect stress in young children, because the behavior of a stressed child may be the same behavior that indicates normal developmental milestones.

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Infants who are stressed may cry and fuss more than other babies and may struggle with adjusting to new environments, including childcare. Toddlers may show stress by displaying abnormal eating and sleeping habits, having more frequent tantrums than other children their age, and/or being more distracted than normal. Stressed toddlers also may be aggressive, trying to bite or hit other children more frequently than is typical for that age.

Preschoolers who are stressed may regress into infant or toddler-like behaviors, or be abnormally irritable, angry, or fearful. They may cry excessively or have disrupted eating and sleeping patterns. They also may act jittery, nervous, or agitated, or they may withdraw from people or situations.

## Helping with Stress

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Children who receive support from adults cope better with stress, and they develop ways to manage stress that serve them throughout life. A key factor is consistency. Infants and toddlers, especially those who are stressed, find comfort in predictability. When possible, avoid introducing new routines, different schedules, or unfamiliar foods when you suspect an infant or toddler is stressed.

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Sometimes, personnel changes in your childcare setting may require children to adjust to different caregivers. This can be particularly difficult for infants and toddlers who struggle with change. To make the transition easier, keep routines and the environment consistent and calm; keep familiar, trusted caregivers with the child as much as possible.

Remember that laughter and fun are anecdotes to stress. Running, skipping, and jumping provide children opportunities to develop gross motor skills, and also to expend energy and relieve stress.

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Art experiences in which children can express themselves can be helpful to stressed preschoolers, particularly painting, coloring, and working with dough or clay-like materials. Playing in sand or water and similar hands-on sensory activities also can give young children an outlet for relieving the pressures of stress, as can dramatic play and puppets.

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Books and storytelling in a restful, relaxed environment can help children who are stressed. Consider adding soft cushions, pillows, and other comforting objects to make the story area more appealing.

Preschoolers benefit from consistency and predictability, just like infants and toddlers, so keep this in mind when considering routines and activities. Preschool-age children who are stressed may need increased personal space and "alone time." Look for ways to help children fulfill those needs within the childcare environment.

Be aware of your own perceptions and susceptibility to stress. One of the most important ways adults can help children manage stress is to model healthy behavior. If you become stressed during your childcare day, you may pass on that stress to the children in your care. As you work to help children who are experiencing stress, realize that this in itself can be stressful for you as a childcare provider. Remember to take time for yourself, do

things you enjoy, and seek out people who support and nurture you.

*Marna Holland*

*Parent Educator, Asheville, NC, City Schools Preschool*

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## **Internet Resources**

**Caring for Kids: Children and Stress**, Penn State Cooperative Extension Service;  
[betterkidcare.psu.edu/CaringForKids/CaringForKids2-3.pdf](http://betterkidcare.psu.edu/CaringForKids/CaringForKids2-3.pdf)

**Children and Stress: Caring Strategies to Guide Children**, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service; [www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/family/350-054/350-054.html](http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/family/350-054/350-054.html)

**Helping Children Cope with Stress**, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service;  
[www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/copestress.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/copestress.html) and  
[www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/disas3.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/disas3.html)

**Stress and Children**, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Head Start Bureau;  
[www.bmcc.edu/Headstart/As\\_I\\_Am/stress\\_children.htm](http://www.bmcc.edu/Headstart/As_I_Am/stress_children.htm)

**Stress Management for Childcare Providers**,  
[www.childhealthonline.org/stressman.htm](http://www.childhealthonline.org/stressman.htm)

**Stress Reduction Among Childcare Providers**, All Family Resources,  
[www.familymanagement.com/childcare/practices/stress.reduction.practices.htm](http://www.familymanagement.com/childcare/practices/stress.reduction.practices.htm)

**Teachers Helping Young Children in Times of Stress**, Ohio State University Extension Service; [ohioline.osu.edu/flm99/fs07.html](http://ohioline.osu.edu/flm99/fs07.html)

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