

Stress busting activities for young children

Stress is often thought of as a grown-up condition, but children can also experience stress. Stress in children can result from school, homework, friends, family disruptions, changes in routines, and many other situations. Stress can

be observed as an obvious physical reaction such as crying or a headache, or it can be an emotional or behavioral reaction such as worrying or shyness. Reactions to stress can vary with the child's age and stage of development.

If early childhood practitioners can identify stress in young children, they can intervene with stress-relief strategies before little pressures turn into big problems. There are several strategies children can be taught to help them cope with stress.

Exercise

This is one of the best stress relief activities for children (and adults too!). Children can participate in an organized sport, be part of a team, or just spend time outside playing with friends. Regular exercise can help children feel less stressed, and if children experience a particularly stressful day, a few hours of active play can reduce their stress.

Deep breathing

Any child old enough to count to four can learn to how to do deep breathing exercises to lower stress. Children, with the help of adults, slowly count to four as they inhale, and then count to four as they exhale. This exercise should be done for several minutes until the child is calm.

Muscle relaxation

Children can relieve stress by using muscle relaxation exercises. Children, with the help of adults, can easily learn to tense and relax each muscle group while they are lying down. The activity starts at the top of the head; each child works his way down to the tips of his toes. The child simply tenses up each muscle group, then releases it and continues on to the next group until he has gone through his whole body.

Visual imagery

This is a way for children to create positive and relaxing images and thoughts that can be used to block out upsetting ones. Children identify a favorite place, a relaxing point in time, or a special happy memory. Then the children close their eyes and imagine that they are at that favorite place.

Sensory activities

These can have a calming effect on children when they experience stress. Play dough is a popular childhood material that provides a wonderful sensory experience. When children feel stress, give them play dough to squeeze, pound, and manipulate. A stress ball offers a similar experience for children because they can squeeze the squishy ball. Finger painting and playing with water or sand are other sensory activities that can be used to reduce stress.

Journaling

Journaling offers a place for older children to release their feelings about a stressful situation. A journal can be as simple as a plain notebook decorated by the child. Encourage children to write about their thoughts and feelings. Younger children can draw pictures. A journal may help children figure out how to handle a particular stressful situation.

Hobbies

These can be any activity that the child enjoys doing. Encourage the child to participate on a regular basis. Engaging in a favorite hobby brings children enjoyment, gives them a break from the stressful situation, and may provide a fresh look at the situation. Offer children different activities to try if they don't have a favorite hobby. Providers may plan experiences in art, music, board games, reading, puzzles, or science for the children to try.

Music

Some children are able to reduce stress and boost feelings by listening, exercising, or dancing to music. Practitioners can work with children to experiment with different types and styles of music to help encourage relaxation.

Healthy lifestyles

Children should eat nutritious regular meals and snacks throughout the day to give them the energy they need to tackle the day. Foods filled with sugar and caffeine provide energy for a short time, but once it wears off children feel sluggish and tired. Getting the correct amount of sleep is important to help children think clearly and face the challenges of the day ahead.

Talking about stress

Caregivers can be good listeners when children come with even the slightest "problem." The caregiver can listen to them and help them with advice if they want it, but some children just want to talk things out with a trusted adult.

Use books and stories to talk about stressful and everyday events.

Stories can help young children relate to characters that are in stressful situations and learn how to work out their problems. Some suggested books for young children include:

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst

Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves by Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

A Boy and a Turtle by Lori Lite

Early educators teach children valuable life skills such as sharing, critical thinking, and independence. Teaching children how to cope with stressful situations is another very valuable skill that supports children's growth into successful adults.

Additional Resources:

Galinsky, Ellen. 2010. *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Honig, Alice Sterling. 2009. *Little Kids, Big Worries: Stress-Busting Tips for Early Childhood Classrooms*. Baltimore: Brooks Publishing Company.

Youngs, Bettie B. 1995. *Stress and Your Child: Helping Kids Cope with the Strains and Pressures of Life*. New York: Ballentine Books.