

Helping Preschoolers Cope with Stress

Is it just me, or have you noticed that children seem to be more irritable lately? They are crying and whining at what seems to be the drop of a hat and having difficulty sleeping through the night. And to really confuse things, their eating habits are different. One day they will eat their favorite dish. The next day, they may not even touch it. And you know that you prepared it with the exact same ingredients!

When we step back to think and reflect about what makes us feel this way. What comes to mind? What makes us irritable, hard to get along with or cranky? It's usually when we are under stress or feeling worried about things. Sometimes we even struggle to control our feelings and emotions. We feel what we feel and sometimes we react without thinking things through. Wow, this seems very similar to how young children react!

As adults, we may forget that children also feel stress. Their stress can come from not getting their way with their siblings or peers. As caregivers we need to be mindful that our stress can be transferred to young children. They are also affected by the environmental stressors, just as adults are.

With the recent pandemic, we are all feeling stressed. Schools and businesses have closed. Families have been quarantined in their homes for months. Our sense of normalcy is gone. Our young children are probably the most vulnerable during these times. Just think about things from perspective. Their schedules have been altered drastically. They haven't seen their friends or teachers in quite some time. Their social connections that happened at circle time, during outdoor play or small group have stopped. And their physical activities have been limited as a result of the quarantine. And we know how important it is for young children to move their bodies. It's no wonder they are restless and cranky. Their bodies are stressed. As preschoolers, they may not have developed the language to articulate how they feel.

The good news is that if we step back and take a deep breath, we can begin to figure out how to support the young children in our care. We can teach preschoolers 1) how to become more aware of their body talk (how it feels), 2) how to use their words to express how they feel, and 3) we can help them develop strategies and coping skills to deal with stress.

Preschoolers may need support in naming and recognizing their feelings and body sensations. We can help them with labeling their feelings and making connections. When you see a child frowning or irritable, saying something like, "Your face is telling me you might be upset about something. Do you know what it is?" Or, "You seem to be trying your shoes with angry hands. Do you want my help?"

Sometimes, in our good intentions to keep children busy we end up overscheduling their time. Their bodies begin to show signs of fatigue or overtiredness. They may become agitated or restless. Teach them to listen to their bodies. While it is true that preschoolers need plenty of physical movement like playing, dancing or running/jumping, they also need downtime. And, finally young children need plenty of rest. The sleep recommendation for preschoolers is 10-12 hours a night! Be consistent with these habits. If you make a mistake, don't beat yourself up. Start over. We are role modeling how to accept our mistakes as well.

Resources:

Stress in Childhood: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002059.htm>

How Stress Affects Children and How to Manage it

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-stress-affects-children-how-to-manage-it/>

Stress and Young Children

<https://www.mentalhelp.net/stress/and-young-children/>

NAEYC: Coping with Stress and Violence

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/coping-stress-and-violence>

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Community Health Resources

