

# Caring for the inner child – minimising stress in child care settings

by Anne Stonehouse

Children experience stress at times, just as adults do. The term 'stress' is used in general to describe negative feelings of anxiety or the fear a person may experience when they are overly busy or have a number of negative events or situations in their lives (Response Ability, 2010). This article will assist educators to recognise when children are experiencing stress and will provide practical strategies for minimising stress for children in child care settings.

Experiencing a certain amount of stress and anxiety is a normal part of daily life. For example, many children will feel shy at times, have fears and be anxious when left in an unfamiliar setting and/or with people they do not know well or at all. However, experiencing significant stress and anxiety over a long period of time can be damaging to children's health, wellbeing and overall learning and development in the present and for the future. Feeling stressed can interfere with play and learning, interacting with others, and engaging with what is happening in the child care setting.

Children who participate in poor quality child care are likely to experience stress and anxiety as a result. Educators play an important role in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing to ensure that routines, experiences, interactions and the physical environment minimise stress for children.

Resilience, the capacity to cope with changes and challenges and to bounce back after difficult times, 'helps children cope with day-to-day stress and challenges' (Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF], 2009, p. 30). Educators, parents and other adults in children's lives play an important role in supporting children to develop the resilience (EYLF Outcome 3) to help them cope with stress in constructive ways.

## What are signs of stress in children?

Individual differences in disposition exist from birth. Some children are more easygoing and relaxed than others, taking things in their stride, while others are easily challenged and upset. As educators get to know individual children they learn who is more likely to experience stress, how they show it and what helps them to cope.

### This article relates to:

<b>FDCQA Principles:</b>	1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 3.1-3.4, 4.4 and 4.5
<b>OSHCQA Principles:</b>	1.1-1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 3.2, 4.2, 4.3 and 5.3
<b>QIAS Principles:</b>	1.1-1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 6.4 and 6.5

Children show stress in different ways. Some children become withdrawn, quiet and reluctant to engage with others and participate in play and other learning experiences. Others appear sad, and may even cry a lot, especially if they are very young. Some children may behave in uncharacteristically challenging ways, for example being uncooperative or physically or verbally hurtful to other children. While these behaviours are typical for many children occasionally, when there are deviations from the ways a child usually behaves, and when they recur over a period of time, educators need to take notice and consider if the child is feeling stressed.

## What causes stress?

Getting to know children well leads to understanding what causes them to feel stressed. It may be that they expect too much of themselves and fear failing, feel insecure, feel in some way different to others and fear exclusion, or that the physical and social environments are too demanding.

Factors that contribute to stress may come from within the child care setting or from children's family lives. Stress and anxiety are closely related. The three kinds of anxiety seen in children are social anxiety, separation anxiety and general anxiety. Social anxiety occurs when children find being around others stressful. This may occur because they:

- Don't know the other children
- See themselves as being very different to others and fear not being accepted or are experiencing actual exclusion
- Lack the skills to interact well with others
- Don't like being the focus of attention.

Most educators, especially those who work with very young children, are familiar with separation anxiety. This occurs when children do not feel comfortable being away from the people they are attached to. Separation can be stressful for children even when they are with people they know and have a relationship with, and in a familiar setting. When they are with people they do not know and in unfamiliar settings the likelihood of experiencing stress is greater.

General anxiety is feeling stressed about many things, such as new situations or potential failure. Children who are generally anxious often set very high standards for themselves and worry about their ability to meet them. They are also often afraid of being in new situations (Raising Children Network, 2009).

### What can educators do to minimise stress?

The first and most important step to help children cope well with stress is to give priority to forming respectful relationships that allow you to get to know children and build trust and security. Strong relationships are the best buffer against stress. Children need to know that they can get help when they need it.

In general, the younger the child the more protection they need from situations that are likely to cause stress. Some broad guidelines for practice are outlined below.

**Make the settling process positive:** Put in place a flexible settling-in process that helps both children and families to begin to feel secure about their experience in care.

**Be inclusive:** Demonstrate that you value the uniqueness of each child and encourage others to do the same. Help children learn to 'read' others' feelings and to show compassion and empathy – create a culture of caring. Work with children to establish limits and ways of being together that help children to feel secure. Children need to know that racism, exclusion, bullying or other hurtful behaviour will not be accepted.

**Talk with children about their feelings:** When you can see that children are stressed, talk with them. Acknowledge and respect their feelings and be reassuring. Talk with them about what actions you can take together to help relieve their stress.

**Have consistency in educators:** Aim to build in continuity in staffing arrangements and practices,



especially for young children. Being with familiar, trusted adults helps children feel secure. The younger the children are, the more important continuity is in practices and links between home and child care. Being unable to predict what is going to happen because there is no clear, regular routine can cause stress. Children who participate in child care on a part-time basis may also find it challenging each time they go to care to understand what is happening in the routine. However, balance the need for continuity and consistency with some novelty in the physical environment and in the learning opportunities offered. Older children tend to need and appreciate more novelty and variety than younger ones.

**Adapt routines for individual children:** Individualise routines as much as possible to cater for children's wants and needs. Flexibility with sleeping, resting, toileting and eating not only allows children to make some decisions about their own experience but also ensure a calmer environment. Allowing children to have some control over their experience is one way that educators acknowledge children's agency, that is recognising and respecting their ability to make decisions and be active participants in their own learnings.

**Be conscious of factors in the physical environment:** The physical environment can impact on children's stress levels. Make sure there are times and spaces for children to be safely and briefly on their own if they wish to. Some children need time away from the group. Build in quiet, peaceful times and/or places into the day and



into the physical environment. Some children are better than others at focusing their attention and 'tuning out' noise, activity and stimulation in the physical environment. Too many bright colours, too many choices, too many opportunities, too much equipment and too many materials can cause stress. Some children, especially younger ones, can become overwhelmed.

Also be mindful of noise levels. A group of children with one or more adults can generate a lot of noise. Use music thoughtfully and intentionally, not just to contribute to background noise.

Prevent overcrowding. Having too much equipment and too many children in a small space contribute to stress. Set up physical environments to encourage children to disperse.

**Be calm yourself:** Be mindful of your own stress levels and aim to convey calm in your interactions with children. Ensure that you are modeling caring and respectful approaches to others and constructive ways of dealing with conflicts.

**Work collaboratively with families:** As with all aspects of children's experience in child care, work in partnership with families to build resilience in children. When a child is experiencing stress, collaborate with families to help the child and seek specialist help when needed.

## Conclusion

In summary, research indicates that there are several factors that contribute to building resilience in children, including:

- Having a caring and supportive environment that affords a sense of belonging and community
- Being valued
- Others having high expectations of them, along with the support to learn to live up to those expectations
- Having their agency recognised, by allowing them the opportunity to contribute to their own experience and to decisions that affect them. (Response Ability, 2010)

Children benefit when educators examine their practices and make changes to ensure that they give priority to contributing to children's resilience and minimising stress ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

## References and further reading

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- Kostelnik, M.J., Whiren, A.P., Soderman, A.K., & Gregory, K. (2006). *Guiding children's social development: Theory to practice* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Thomson Delmar Learning.
- Response Ability. (2010). *Social and emotional wellbeing – a teacher's guide*. Retrieved 26 September, 2010, from <http://www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=183692>
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- Wilde, A. (2008). *Helping children cope with stress*. Retrieved 25 October, 2010, from <http://www.abc.net.au/health/features/stories/2008/01/29/2148045.htm>

## Useful websites

- Factsheets – The Children's Hospital at Westmead: [www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets](http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets)
- HealthInsite: [www.healthinsite.gov.au/index.cfm](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au/index.cfm)