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Stress and Young Children In The Classroom

It is hard for people who care about young children to believe that they can experience stress, even in classrooms of high quality. Stress is part of life for all of us.

Some stress is “good” stress and some stress is “bad stress”. “Good stress” often happens when we are engaged in something we enjoy, but that requires sustained attention or skill development. This kind of stress can help us grow. In a young child, this might be a preschooler who works hard on something, completes it and shouts out loud, “I did it!!”

“Bad stress” often happens when we are feeling overwhelmed by something. For an adult, this might be not having enough money to pay the bills or not enough time to relax. For young children, this might happen when they are exposed to violence or adult issues at home, when they are not prepared for change, when they are separated from their attachment figures (especially for long periods of time), or when adults are not able to assist them when they need it. This kind of stress can interfere with the growth of the young child.

When young children are at school, it is the role of the teacher and the role of the director to monitor the environment for signs of stress in the children. It is also within their role to manage the environment in such a way to minimize the stress that children might experience.

Ideas For Reducing Stress In The Classroom

- Create a predictable routine and stick to it everyday
- If necessary and/ or possible, prepare children ahead of time, for any changes in the typical routine of the day or in the adults or other children that might be visiting. Young children have active imaginations, so be sure to let them know why this person is there. (*“Mrs. Smith is here to see if her little boy might like to come to this school.”*)
- Pay attention to the noise you can hear in the classroom. Even productive activities or quiet background music can become too distracting for comfort or focus, for some children and adults.
- Make sure teachers communicate using positive language that supports a child’s mastery of a skill or activity. (*“It feels good inside to learn to share with a friend.”*)
- Use language that enhances a child’s sense of worth. (*“I’m so glad you’re here today” or “you worked and worked on that puzzle and you did it!” or “I missed you yesterday”*)
- Embrace the relationships that children have with their families. You may not agree with a parent, or even like a parent, but it is not about you, it is about the child. Children are attached to their primary caregivers, whether you like them or not. Think about what you can say or do to help the adults in a child’s life feel valued as human beings. When people feel valued, they tend to accept more ideas for improvement, which may improve a circumstance and/or reduce stress for all concerned!

- Protect children from aggression by intervening as needed. Empower them with words they can use to express their feelings to the aggressor.
- Offer children choices when possible. When children are allowed to have a voice and learn to make decisions, they learn more about what they enjoy, they learn more about what they don't enjoy and they tend to feel more empowered to speak. Feeling empowered to speak can help children stay safe and minimizes stress.

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