

Helping children deal with stress: Relaxation techniques that work for everyone

Consider the following expectations adults often set for themselves:

- I have to do things perfectly.
- I have to get more done.
- I must keep _____ happy.
- I have to finish before I relax.
- I should be everything to everyone.

And now consider how children might feel the burden of similar—and equally unrealistic—expectations.

Hank, a 4-year-old, is eager to connect with his friends in the block center when he arrives in his classroom. By 9:30, however, he has screamed at another child who wanted to help with construction, picked at his favorite pancake breakfast, and dissolved into tears when his teacher goes to the door to answer a quick question. Ms. Cohen, Hank's teacher, knows that this isn't typical behavior but likely a response to his mother's recent illness and hospitalization.

Stress is a powerful influence on behavior. Some stress can be useful—motivating us to work for societal change, improve family relations, or make it to the bottom of the must-do list. But too much stress, especially stress that stays bottled up, is destructive. It not only gets in the way of cooperative, harmonious work and personal relationships but also damages health. Currently, our world feels like a stress time bomb, making it difficult to quiet a thumping heart, focus on the positive, and think clearly through issues. As a result, we often resort to finger pointing, frenetic activity, and despair.

Because children model the behaviors they see in important adults, they are likely to absorb the stress manifest in the adults who care for them. For example, Jill's dad just lost his job. While Mr. Jones has carefully tried to hide his financial and social concerns, Jill senses his sadness and anger. She overhears bits of conversations and feels confused when he flies off the handle when she doesn't finish all her supper.

Children can have their own stresses as well. Changes in family membership (like a new baby or grandparent's death), a friend's move, a new school, or even a change in daily routine can profoundly affect children. Violence in media—even the television news—can also shake a child's emotional balance, leaving adults unaware of the cause of sudden behavior changes.

Children are not likely to hide or moderate their feelings for the sake of others. Their developmental immaturity—cognitive and social inexperience—leaves them unable to cope with the cause and effects of a tension-filled situation. In a classroom this means that you may have to deal with challenging behaviors. If you respond to an inappropriate behavior, like a 4-year-old's screaming outburst, with a consequence without examining a cause, you

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



risk leaving the child confused and likely to repeat the unacceptable behavior.

Recognize signals of stress

Personality and temperament often predict the way a child responds to a stressful situation. A shy child may often further withdraw; a feisty child may become aggressive. Children may want to rely on, or regress to, their loveys, pacifiers, or thumbs. Stress can cause a robust eater to become picky, an independent friend to become clingy and whiney, and a sound sleeper to become fretful and difficult to soothe.

Many people signal stress through social interactions. They can show symptoms in unclear, muddled thinking (cognitive impact), teary resistance to participation (social impact), fearfulness and distance (emotional impact), and real or imagined ailments (physical impact). Symptoms usually blur across developmental domains, spiraling into uncontrolled and uncontrollable behaviors. Watch for these symptoms of damaging, destructive stress in children and other adults:

- Social or behavioral expressions—changes in performance or personality, including more aggressive or withdrawn behaviors, or resistance to cooperative endeavors;
- Physical expressions—changes in skin temperature (like sweaty palms or clammy skin), increase in heart rate, tense or shaky muscles, stomach upset, headaches, or changes in appetite and sleep patterns;
- Emotional expressions—changes in emotional responses to people and events, increased intensity, or rapid mood swings;
- Cognitive expressions—changes in judgment, memory, and problem-solving abilities, or inability to focus on immediate projects or activities; and
- Language expressions—reduced fluidity in speech, increased repetitive demands and requests, or changes in day-to-day voice volume and timbre.

Watch for, and attend to, these symptoms of stress in young children.

Irritability. Stressed children may lose their tempers easily. They often have difficulty with transitions and changes in routine. Their social relationships become fragile, the ability to negotiate is limited, and fights emerge between best friends. Stress can cause even-tempered, relaxed children to lash out at themselves and others when frustrated by a

challenging task or even a routine one.

Aggression. Many children respond to stress by hitting, shoving, biting, and screaming. This explosion of emotion may be directed at others but is equally likely to be directed inward with behaviors like banging their heads or biting their own arms.

Fears. Most children have fears and many are appropriate. But extreme fear, especially in a usually relaxed, calm child, may indicate damaging stress. Stress can turn typical separation-anxiety tears into protracted, painful sobs. Loud startling noises may provoke panic and tears. Frightening events in the news may develop into nonspecific anxiety, leaving children fearful and nervous about what will happen next.

Sadness and tearfulness. Crying is an appropriate response to physical or emotional pain, but children under stress sometime cry for no apparent reason. Sad, clingy, mopey, slow-to-react children are often trying to cope with stressful events.

Changes in toileting, sleeping, and eating habits. Stress often leads to regression. A classic example is a 3-year-old with successful self-toileting habits who regresses to frequent accidents when a new sibling joins the family. Stress can signal abrupt changes in appetite—eating too much or too little, or even rejecting favorite foods. Excessive sleeping is a typical tool for shutting out stress, but the same stress can cause wakefulness and troubled sleep.

Tantrums. Emotional explosions are often described as tantrums when children cry, scream,



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

thrash on the floor, and sometimes stop breathing. Tantrums are a cry for help from a child who is out of control and needs a trusted adult to help hold the world together.

Health-related complaints. Stressed children may seem to lack energy and look run-down. They may get sick more often than others. Other health-related symptoms may include constipation, vomiting, lethargy, or chronic tiredness.

Language disfluency. Like changes in toileting and eating habits, language fluency is often interrupted by stress. Stammering, mindlessly repeating phrases like “I know,” and the sudden use of foul language may signal stress.

Stress triggers

When children display stress-related symptoms, look for a cause. Typically, children become stressed by events that represent change, fear, or loss—in themselves or in the adults they rely on. Be alert to these common causes.

- The death of a loved one. Other losses like a hospitalization, prolonged absence due to travel or isolation, and family fracture like divorce reflect substantial changes in a child’s primary relationships—changes that the child is too immature to understand and accept.
- Abuse. Children may feel rejected, unloved, or abandoned.
- Major changes in routine. These changes can include moving to a new house, school, or community that disrupt a child’s sense of security.
Current pandemic-related stay-at-home directives turn established work-school-family routines on end, with resultant stresses bouncing from one family member to another in a loop of irritation, frustration, and atypical behaviors.
- Changes in family membership. Stress and insecurity naturally follow the birth or adoption of a new sibling. A parent’s separation, divorce, and remarriage—and especially the introduction of step-siblings—can have profound and long-lasting impacts on children.
- Disorder and inconsistency. Erratic discipline as well as chaotic and haphazard schedules for meals and bedtime can leave children frustrated, confused, and more likely to test limits.
- Unrealistic expectations. Sometimes adults expect too much of a child. The expectation may simply be

excessive or not appropriate to a child’s developmental level. These expectations undermine confidence and make children fearful of inevitable mistakes.

- Cultural dislocation. This cause of stress is common among immigrants and families that move frequently, including children in military families. The demands of learning a new language, eating new foods, incorporating new routines, and forming new relationships—learning to fit in—often manifest in symptoms of stress.
- Disaster, violence, terrorism, and epidemic. Floods, tornadoes, neighborhood shootings, bombings, airplane crashes, and even protective gear like gloves and face masks, traumatize. Videos, television news, and photographs bring horrific events to everyone, creating fear, stress, and feelings of unease and helplessness.

Helping children—and yourself

Children need the attention and support of knowledgeable adults to monitor and control stress.

By helping children learn to identify their own emotional states, and to relax and rechannel anxieties and fears, teachers provide lifelong tools for relief and calm. Clare Cherry (1981) suggests activities to help children achieve serenity in early childhood classrooms. These activities can help children recognize they are feeling their own body’s stress signals like feeling jittery or breathing fast and to use techniques to help control that stress or fear.

Learn—and teach children—to relax. Classic relaxation techniques reduce blood pressure and muscle tension and slow heart and pulse rates. Learning to relax is one of the most useful ways for children—and adults—to manage stress.

Start by building ritual relaxation practices. For example, when you gather children into a daily circle time, begin by modeling this effective relaxation technique:

1. As you count slowly from 1 to 5, inhale as you lift your shoulders toward your ears.
2. Hold for a short pause.
3. Count down from 5 to 1, exhaling as you lower your shoulders.
4. Shimmy your shoulders into a natural position.
5. Smile

Repeat the technique and invite the children to relax into circle time with you.

Make relaxation techniques part of your daily

routine. Designate an area of the space where children can go to unwind. Introduce muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and movement exercises that help children identify and reduce tension. Use these ideas to get your practice going.

Muscle relaxation

Muscle relaxation techniques involve refocusing attention from the source of anxiety on to general body awareness and a sense of calm.

Melting muscles. Invite children to lie quietly on the floor and to imagine themselves as a floppy rag doll. Help children identify the feeling of loose, relaxed muscles by asking them to tighten and then release a group of muscles—the face, a fist, or the legs, for example. The practice of tightening and releasing teaches relaxation by contrast.

Build on the melting muscles by adding soothing music and directing muscle tightening and then relaxing again. This exercise is particularly useful at the start of children’s nap time (or at bedtime for fretful adults). Lie down on the back with hands at the side, palms facing the ceiling. Using a calm and quiet voice, direct children’s attention to the toes and feet. Invite a little wiggle and remind children how hard their feet have worked during the morning—walking, running, jumping, and helping with balance. Instruct the children to tense (squeeze) the foot muscles, and then relax them (letting the muscles become limp). Use a count of 3 to squeeze and relax. Proceed up the body naming calves, knees, thighs,

bottoms, bellies, backs, fingers, arms, shoulders, necks, foreheads, and finally the eyes. Periodically talk about how soft, lazy, limp, and loose the children’s bodies feel.

Tense and flop. Gather children and invite them to stretch their limbs to the longest possible. Some may balance on the balls of their feet, others may feel wobbly just stretching their arms overhead. Accept all attempts and encourage trying to touch the ceiling or the sky. Build by slowly counting to 5, pause, and again slowly relax the body, flopping over from the waist.

Build on the flop by encouraging the children to imagine being a giraffe, stretching to eat the highest leaf, or an elephant, swinging a trunk to and fro.

Hang loose. Give the tense and flop activity a new name and encourage children to employ the technique whenever they feel—or you observe—tension building. Let *Hang Loose* become code for taking a breath, standing tall with rigid muscles, and then hanging loose—letting the head drop so the chin touches the chest, the shoulders slump, the chest ooze into the stomach, and legs feel wobbly and elastic. Stress relief and recovery time will be accompanied by giggles!

Yoga lion. Use this classic yoga exercise even if you don’t have a yoga practice. Invite children to sit with their legs crossed in front of them and their hands on their knees. Describe and mimic a lion’s growling face: Mouth open and tense, eyes squinting, ears pulled back, nostrils flared, and forehead wrinkled. Ask the children to mimic your lion’s face, directing their attempts by mentioning facial features and giving children time to get all of their muscles coordinated. Practice together, counting to 5 as the children imitate the lion’s face. Hold briefly then slowly relax the muscles again to a count of 5.

Deep breathing

Teach and practice breathing techniques that reduce stress. Any conscious breathing exercise increases oxygen and reduces stress reactions like muscle tension, headaches, and aggression.

Inhale and exhale. Inhale slowly, hold the breath, and exhale even more slowly. Start with short counting, 1 to 3, for example, and gradually expand the breathing range by counting to 5 and eventually to 10. Help children imagine their lungs filling like a balloon and deflating like a slow tire leak.

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



Sleeping beasts. Lie down and pretend to be a huge animal—an elephant, rhinoceros, or dinosaur—going to sleep. Let children imagine and practice breathing slowly and deeply for a few minutes.

Blow out the candles. Invite children to imagine an enormous birthday cake for someone who is really old—like 100 years. Invite them to pretend to blow out all the candles with a single breath.

Movement

Movement activities, indoors or outside, can invite stress and tension relief. Research science is consistent in finding exercise beneficial to physical and emotional well-being. A simple walk in the park or around the playground, with stops to notice and appreciate a flower, insect, or construction can quiet breathing and instill calm.

Boats. Ask children to choose a partner and to sit on the floor facing the partner, with legs extended in front. Tell the children to lean forward and hold hands. Encourage the pairs to see themselves as tiny boats bouncing in a big river. Show how to rock the boats gently, back and forth, stretching muscles and moving rhythmically.

Melting ice cream. Gather children and ask for descriptions of ice cream in a dish. How does it look when it's frozen? Hard, stiff, and icy. Tell the children the ice cream has been left on an outside table on a hot summer day. Now how does it look? Soft, mushy, and warm. Invite the children to stand and make their bodies as hard as a scoop of frozen ice cream. As you slowly count to 10, ask the children to melt, dripping and puddling to the floor. While still on the floor, ask the children to breathe slowly, feeling their soft, loose muscles.

Mirror me. Use this mime game to help children identify how emotional states are reflected in facial expressions. Ask children to choose a partner and one of two colors. In each team, one partner is green and the other yellow, for example. Tell the green partners to think of the faces they make when they are sad, happy, angry, frustrated, and unsure, for example, and to put on that face without talking about it with their partner.

The yellow partner looks at green's face and mimics it—like looking in a mirror. After a slow count to 5, let the partners talk about the faces and the emotions they communicated. Repeat the game allowing the partners to change places.

Reducing stress: A lifelong skill

Relaxation is a life skill that gains increased importance in troubling times. Learning to relax does not come easily, for children or adults; it takes effort and focus impacting all developmental domains. Stress, whether generated by conflicts, worries, illnesses, or grief will impact everyone. Too often we are unprepared to maintain equanimity and unable to find self-control and calm.

Learned and practiced relaxation skills are sure tools for discovering and finding increased well-being and reducing the damaging impact of stress—across the lifespan.

References

- Cherry, Clare. (1981). *Think of something quiet*. Belmont, CA: Pitman Learning.
- Heil, M. and Rosen, I.S. (2020). *Yoga and mindfulness for young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Salcedo, Michelle. (2018). *Uncover the roots of challenging behavior: Create responsive environments where young children thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Thomas, Patrice. (2003). *The power of relaxation*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. ■