



Supporting Children Who Are Experiencing Stress



Small and large signs that your program is committed to diversity, inclusion, and support for each and every child may lessen anxiety.

Recent social and political changes have brought up feelings of fear and anxiety in many communities. In some communities, protests or even violent conflicts may be happening near children. It is not surprising, then, that these communities' children may be exhibiting signs of anxiety. Child care providers can take steps to help children cope with worry and the uncertainty that change brings. First and foremost, it's important to reaffirm to children that when they are in child care, they are with people who care for them and will support them. Small and large signs that your program is committed to diversity, inclusion, and support for each and every child may lessen anxiety. In addition, please take a moment to read the following information about stress in young children, and strategies providers can take to reduce children's stress levels.

- **Infants and toddlers (ages 0-2)** cannot understand that difficult changes are underway, but if their parent or other caregiver is upset, children will sense it. They may start to show the same emotions as their caregivers, or they may act differently than usual, like crying for no reason, withdrawing from people, or not playing with their toys.
- **Children 3-5 years old** can understand the effects of a major shift in the world around them. They may have trouble adjusting to change and loss and, if they witness violence, may become traumatized. They depend on the adults around them to help them feel better and to explain what is happening, and why.

What Stress May Look Like and How to Respond - Infants

Age Group/Behaviors

- Crying more than usual
- More clinginess
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping more than usual
- Changes in eating or bowel movements

What You Can Do

- Keep routines in care normal and consistent
- Hold and rock more, be affectionate
- Keep a positive attitude
- Reassure as needed
- Be patient

What Stress May Look Like and How to Respond - Toddlers

Age Group/Behaviors

- Loss of appetite
- May regress to acting younger, for example, wanting a bottle AND using “baby talk”
- Clinginess
- Cries or screams a lot
- Being more aggressive —hitting or pushing

What You Can Do

- Play with them
- Continue to hug and give affection
- Pay attention to how they play

Supporting Children

- Keep routines normal and continue favorite rituals or activities
- Maintain a “peaceful” atmosphere
- Make sure children are eating regular, healthy meals
- Always reassure children that you will do whatever you can to keep them safe
- Limit exposure to the media and adult conversations about the change that’s underway
- Answer any questions children have. Be honest without giving a lot of detail
- Talk about the event when children bring it up – don’t try to change the subject. Correct any “false” ideas young children may have about what happened. The language you use and information you give should always be age-appropriate.

Help children feel in control by allowing them to have choices. Choices give them a voice and allow them to feel in charge of a situation, no matter how small. Example: Giving a 4 year old a choice of playing with blocks or doing an art activity.

Teach children ways to calm themselves like dancing to music, breathing deeply, or doing art activities.

Give opportunities for emotional expression through activities like playing with Play Dough, drawing, building, and dramatic play.

