

Disaster Recovery

Children's reactions to stress

Children are individuals. Each child in your classroom has a different personality, family background, and way of dealing with life. The following behaviors are found to some degree in all children, but each child will exhibit a unique combination of these coping behaviors. As an early childhood professional, you need to be accepting of each child's reaction to stress, watching closely for extremes in behavior that continue over several days.

The aggressive child

The aggressive child's typical way of reacting to others when under stress is by forceful and uncontrolled physical aggression (biting, kicking, scratching, hitting) and or verbal aggression (shouting, screaming, cursing, name calling). After such outbursts, aggressive children frequently find it difficult to calm down. They may appear confused and often may burst into tears. Aggressive children often are demanding, impatient, and destructive (tearing books, breaking toys, pulling dolls apart, ripping pictures off the wall). They often have difficulty doing activities that require patience (puzzles, string beads). They are, however, able to become actively engrossed in activities that show quick results (block building). They frequently hurt others with or without provocation. They often appear to want friendship from other children, but often defeat their friendly intentions with rough behavior.

The anxious child

Anxious children appear to worry a lot when stressed. Little things bother them. They may talk about their fears and concerns, displaying a confused understanding. They often cry. Physical symptoms of their stress include wetting or soiling themselves, nail biting, hair twisting, rocking, and head banging. They may become frightened by their own makebelieve (truly believing that terrible monsters live under the art table or behind the refrigerator). Messy activities may upset them (getting paint on their clothes or arms). They often are perfectionists in their work and seem overly sensitive to negative criticism. Many worry about what others think of them.

Often anxious children have a great deal of trouble making decisions, not knowing their own wants, but also not wanting someone else's advice. They appear overly sober and serious, but may have sudden outbursts of crying, anger, or uncontrollable laughter. They need structure and a predictable classroom, becoming upset by changes in routine (a field trip) or changes in equipment (replacement of toys).

The withdrawn child

This child may have a favorite spot in the classroom and frequently retreats to it when stressed. He or she often exhibits self-comforting behavior—thumb sucking, rocking, or pulling on hair or ears. This child is easily startled and often cries. Such children appear disinterested in most classroom activities. At other times, they will watch another child do a particular activity but, when encouraged to participate, will stubbornly refuse.

Withdrawn children typically give up toys or turns without a struggle. If they cry or protest, they usually are so timid or quiet that nobody notices. Because they do not let their anger out toward others, they frequently take their anger out on themselves, destroying their artwork or games. When spoken to, these children often turn away or sit in stony-faced silence. They often daydream, having recurring fantasies about imaginary creatures, heroes, and heroines.

The overlyresponsible child—the placater

Even under stress, the placater is dependable, obedient, and eager to please. On the surface many of these children seem to be well adjusted; teachers often refer to them as “little adults.” However, placaters are overly concerned with what others think about them. They are perfectionists and frequently do more than is expected. Although they often do beautiful work and sit patiently at their desks, they show insecurity about their abilities. They may ask if they painted their pictures right or did a good job on puzzles. Because these children often have difficulty “letting go,” they seldom display spontaneity or creativity. They suppress positive and negative feelings; even when justifiably provoked, these children find it difficult to express anger or disappointment.

These children respond to stress by trying to take charge, which follows their need for planned and controlled behaviors. They frequently volunteer for classroom tasks. Teachers often learn that placaters have been carrying out adult responsibilities at home (a 6-year-old setting the alarm and waking family members in the morning or babysitting a 3-year-old sibling.)

[Adapted From Iowa Cooperative Extension by Chuck Hill, Extension Specialist4H and Development]