

Caregiver sensitivity: Stress – seeing with optimism



Stress, as defined by Alice Sterling Honig, Professor Emerita of Child Development, Syracuse University, is when “a person shows, by difficulties in personal relationships and worrisome bodily responses, that he or she is having a struggle and cannot cope with felt or perceived difficulties.” Many children face not just one type of stress, but clusters of stress factors like separation, illness, divorce, and developmental challenges. And some face even worse stressors such as poverty, abuse, and abandonment. Caring for children who are experiencing stress can conjure up anxieties and fears.

“The way we think about stress and what we choose to do about it can affect the impact of a stressful event.”

American Academy of Pediatrics

A New Lens: learning about the good

What if we were to consider looking at stress through a different lens, finding empowerment as opposed to worry? What if we were to try to look at stress with optimism?

“What do you learn in your moments of stress? What will the kids take away from it? Help them think through; breathe through it, live with it in a healthy fashion! Take ownership of these moments and call them memories.”

Leanne, Military Avenue Blog

It’s helpful to look at stress with hopefulness. For example, it is often during stressful times that we begin to pay closer attention, identify problems, begin to understand the origins of our stress and do something about it. In return, new skills are learned, emotions are better understood, needs are addressed, relationships are reinforced, and life is made better. Read Christine’s story:

“Six months ago, I would walk into work and sigh when I saw Henry. He exhibited aggressive behaviors (hitting, throwing toys, wrecking other’s work, etc.). I started taking detailed notes on everything he said, did, who was around him – everything. I started to notice some patterns in behavior. I also found out his parents were separated. In reviewing language development, I noticed his language skills were lacking. In working with his family, and my director, we got help. We have learned skills to help Henry help himself, like signing and shadowing his play. Now, I can’t wait to see Henry everyday.”

Christine, Early Educator

Gentle persistence: observe

We know that stress in a child’s life may bring behavioral changes and challenges. Stress can show up physically, mentally, behaviorally, and socially. Be persistent and document behavior that seems odd or troubling. As we observe behaviors, we can compare these to typically developing behaviors. Understanding the developing child empowers us with information to better understand the behaviors exhibited and plan appropriately. For support in reflecting, access our developmental chart [Caring for Growing Children](#).

Stress - What to look for:

- Do symptoms/behaviors last a long time and occur often? What are the behaviors? What is the intensity of the symptom (try rating on a scale of 1-10)
- Do symptoms/behaviors show in many settings or just in one area or with one person?
- Do symptoms/behaviors cause the child to not function, be distressed, or both?
- Does the child have positive attachments with at least one adult?
- Do you see the child responding to other children and emotions? How?
- How does the child show self regulation and dealing with emotions?

Finding children's true strength: an optimistic action

"We cannot know all the reasons for a child's stress, but we surely need to become creative in thinking of and choosing ways to help scared, disappointed, jealous, or angry children."

Alice Sterling Honig

In the book *Your Child's Strength*, Jennifer Fox, M.Ed., explores how developing children's strengths produce the resilience needed to handle setbacks, stress, and challenges. Fox's writing relates to what we know from research on resiliency: "Early success in school – related to effective care, positive home-school connections and effective classroom practices – appears to be a key segue to resilience, particularly for very disadvantaged children. A resilience framework for systems of care has emerged, with an emphasis on building strengths and competence in children,

their families, their relationships and the communities where they live." (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006) Fox maintains that every child can find success in school and in life if we start focusing on the strengths they have, rather than on what they lack. She's careful to state that strengths are not talents or skills, but rather, "Strengths are activities that make a person feel energized, empowered, and strong." Fox lists three main areas for strengths in children: Activity Strengths, tasks that make you feel engaged and energized; Relationship Strengths, things you do for and with other people that make you feel valued and competent; and Learning Strengths, the unique ways you approach and understand new information. "It is wonderful when our true strengths find a way of shining through the stress." - Leanne, Military Avenue Blog

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