

Tip Sheet

Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn Responses

The nervous system is designed to protect people in dangerous situations, such as during a bear attack or when escaping a fire. However, sometimes the nervous system gets confused and triggers similar responses in less threatening situations, such as disagreeing with a friend, being asked to do something by a teacher, or being in an overwhelming environment.

People often respond to stress with a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response, which helps them either escape or confront what their bodies perceive as threatening or stressful.

To help, caregivers can learn to recognize the signs of each response and craft strategies for students to regulate and avoid response escalation.

Fight Response

What it looks like:

- Crying; clenching fists or jaws; physical aggression such as punching, kicking, or hitting; biting; swearing or screaming; spitting.
- Fight response helps people escape or confront perceived danger or stress.

Example:

- Jose is playing alone in the dramatic play area, setting the table as if it were a restaurant. Margaret comes over to play and begins moving things on the table. Jose screams at Margaret and pushes her. The teacher approaches to help and guides Jose to a different area to discuss what is happening. When the teacher touches his shoulder, Jose turns, kicks the teacher, and spits.

How can I help a child in a fight response:

- Remain calm and quiet.
- Remove or reduce hazards that could cause harm to self or others.
- Provide safe ways to manage the feeling: paper to rip, clay or playdough to smash, cotton balls to throw, pillows to punch.
- Help name the emotion calmly.
- Practice scripts with a child to use when, for example, they need space, want to play alone, or need to ask how to join a game.

Flight Response

What it looks like:

- Restlessness, darting eyes, lack of eye contact, excessive fidgeting, rapid breathing, or running away.

Example:

- Sara is sitting at circle time with a teacher. After a few minutes, she starts to wiggle and poke at her friends next to her. Another child is being dropped off, and a second teacher is greeting the child and the parent. Sara is looking back and forth between the two teachers. She covers her ears. Sara stands up and tries to run out of the classroom as the parent leaves.

How can I help a child in a flight response?

- Remain calm, validate, and reassure.
- Create a safe space for the child to “get away” to, such as a calm corner.
- Allow access to fidgets or sensory materials
- Take a walk with the child or offer heavy work (remove stressors).

Freeze Response

What it looks like:

- A state of paralysis.
- Holding one's breath, shutting down, disconnecting, hiding, appearing spacey or zoned out, or having difficulty articulating thoughts.
- A child may go into a freeze response if unable to fight or flee.

Example:

- Reanna and a friend are playing with blocks. Reanna knocks over her friend's tower, and he starts crying. The teacher raises his voice across the room. "Reanna, you need to play nicely and stop knocking over blocks. Say you're sorry." Reanna sits on the carpet and stares, not moving, making a few sounds, but no words.

How can I help a child in a freeze response?

- Remain calm and use a quiet voice.
- Avoid touching the child; stay nearby. Model deep breathing and reassure them by narrating the event to help reframe their perspective.
- Offer opportunities for movement, such as stretches, finger tapping, or large motor movements like rocking back and forth.
- Engage the child's senses with [the 5-4-3-2-1 method](#).
- Learn to discern a child's patterns.

Fawn Response

What it looks like:

- Becoming more appealing to perceived threat.
- Intense worry; eager to please or overly compliant; hesitant to express needs or opinions; avoids conflict; poor boundaries.
- A need for constant validation.

Example:

- Louie has been in the younger preschool room for a few weeks. He cries for a long time at drop-off. He follows his teacher around the classroom throughout the day, needing to stay close when sitting, working, or playing. He lets the other children take his toys even though his face shows he's sad. Instead of playing, he wants to help the teacher wash tables or do other tasks around the room. The teacher can't spend time with other children or leave the room without Louie crying and getting upset.

How can I help a child in a fawn response?

- Remain calm, be close, and quietly reassure.
- Validate and help label their feelings.
- Provide safe ways to express feelings privately.
- Model and guide through situations.
- Create a predictable schedule and routines that are posted in the room so children can see them.
- Provide scripts to help them voice their needs.

Additional Resources

Giving traumatized kids a head start in healing

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/giving-traumatized-kids-head-start-healing>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org/>

Creative Touch Counseling Center

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBXN459P_TQ

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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