

Tip Sheets

Self-Care Strategies for Child Care Providers: Part 1

Child care involves relationship-based work caring for and teaching infants and young children — often for many hours or all day. Because infants and young children cannot yet care for themselves, they need adults who will pay close attention to how they communicate their needs.

In many childcare settings, professionals attend to the needs of many infants and young children at the same time and are often pulled in many directions. Days can feel busy and chaotic especially when the children in care are, themselves, experiencing stress and burnout. In some cases, caregivers can even experience secondary traumatic stress.

It is important for child care providers to recognize the symptoms of burnout and secondary trauma so that they can practice self-care strategies to lessen the impact of stress on their bodies and their work.

Stress

Stress means different things to different people, in different settings and under various circumstances. For some it might be a physical feeling, while for others it may be a particular situation. Scientists have studied how the body responds to stress and have discovered that the body moves between feeling calm to feeling stressed and back to calm many times in a day.

Burnout and Secondary Trauma

Child care, while rewarding at times, can be stressful for some professionals, and many have

described feeling burned out. (This is one reason people name when they leave the child care field). In some cases, child care workers can even experience secondary traumatic stress due to their work with children who have experienced trauma.

Signs of Secondary Trauma

- Hypervigilance
- Hopelessness
- Inability to embrace complexity
- Inability to listen
- Avoidance of clients
- Anger and cynicism
- Sleeplessness
- Fear
- Chronic exhaustion
- Physical ailments
- Minimizing
- Guilt

If you are experiencing symptoms of burnout, secondary trauma, and/or stress, it is important to seek help by visiting with your supervisor or seek professional help as needed.

Polyvagal Theory

The Polyvagal Theory — developed in 2011 by Stephen Porges and adapted by mental health professional Deb Dana into useful resources for professionals in a variety of fields — examines how our nervous system reacts during stress.

Understanding this theory helps put the science behind the important work done by child care professionals every day and provides new ideas for managing stress and strengthening relationships.

Automatic Nervous System (ANS)

Stress is energy that lives in our bodies that gives us physiological symptoms. The symptoms or feelings triggered within our bodies often come from something we experience outside our bodies. We feel sensations like a racing heart, shortness of breath, or even tingling because of our ANS.

Cranial Nerve

Humans have billions of nerves, but one of the most important is called the cranial nerve. The cranial nerve is actually 12 pairs of nerves that send information between and the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, and tongue).

Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve (also called the vagal nerves) are the main nerves of your parasympathetic nervous system. This system primarily regulates our heart, our breathing, and our digestive system. When we feel calm, these organs and systems work well. When we feel stress, these organs and systems react in different ways that we can sense or feel along this nerve.

Beyond the *Fight or Flight* System

Most people are familiar with the idea of “fight or flight, but it is only one of three parts of our body’s stress response system. Dana outlines a hierarchy that developed in humans over time to manage stress in three different parts:

1. Dorsal Vagal System
2. Sympathetic Nervous System
3. Ventral Vagal System

1. Dorsal Vagal System

The earliest humans developed what is called the dorsal vagal system. During stress, this allowed us to feel shut down, disconnected, foggy, numb, and feel lost, abandoned, and/or invisible.

Sympathetic Nervous System

Later, humans developed the sympathetic/fight or flight system. During stress, this system mobilizes us into hypervigilance and action to keep us safe and look and listen for more evidence of danger.

Ventral Vagal System

Most recently, humans developed the ventral vagal system, which regulates safety and fear, in part, by connecting to other people. This is important because our complex ANS is something that differentiates humans from other mammals. Specifically, it shows that there was an evolutionary and adaptive need for humans to develop a system to feel connected and socially engaged with others in order to feel safe. In other words, this is what is meant when people say “we are wired to connect.”

Putting It All Together

Understanding the importance of human connections, social engagement, and feelings of safety is at the heart of relationship-based child care work.

Additional Resources

How to Use Polyvagal Theory to Shift Your Nervous System with Deb Dana (Podcast)

<https://drdianahill.com/035-how-to-use-polyvagal-theory-to-shift-your-nervous-system-with-deb-dana>

Information adapted from Understanding & Cultivating Self-Care Strategies for Child Care Providers curriculum by M. Harrison, Ph.D., LICSW, IMH-E®

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