

Tip Sheets

Stress in Early Care and Education

While those working with young children experience many rewards, their jobs are also physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. The early care and education professional needs to be flexible, compassionate and have an endless supply of energy. Indeed, working with young children and their families can become stressful.

What is Stress?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH, 2017), stress is defined as how the brain and body respond to any demand such as exercise, work, school, major life changes or traumatic events. Stress is a natural response of the body when an individual is faced with something new or a task that is a challenge.

Types of Stress

When stress is discussed it is often in relation to its negative impacts. It is important to keep in mind that not all stress is the same. The following are three specific types of stress.

1. Positive Stress

Positive stress is motivating and a necessary component of development, reaching goals and development of healthy ways of coping and skills in problem-solving. Positive stress typically affects the body by creating an increased heart rate and an increase in the release of stress hormones throughout the body. These bodily changes do not last very long and then the body returns to normal.

2. Tolerable Stress

Tolerable stress is considered to occur in circumstances in which there is a danger of threat or harm but the individual has access to supportive relationships that diminish the threat and help the individual to develop coping skills. Examples of tolerable stress include the death or serious illness of a loved one, a frightening accident, divorce or a natural disaster.

3. Toxic Stress

Toxic stress occurs when adverse experiences are sustained over a long period of time.

Five Facts about Stress

1. Everyone experiences stress

Everyone experiences stress at one time or another. Some people may cope with stress more effectively or recover from events that are stressful more quickly than others

2. Not all stress is negative

Stress can be positive when it motivates an individual to solve a problem or prepare for a new challenge. For example, stress can motivate a speaker to prepare for a speaking engagement, a student to study for an exam or a person to prepare and pack for a vacation. Stress also helps individuals to respond in situations of danger through increasing pulse rate, faster breathing and causing muscles to tense so that the brain uses more oxygen and increases the ability to actively respond to the situation.



3. Long-term stress can impact health

Ongoing or long-term stress can affect physical and mental health. When the bodily responses to danger do not have an opportunity to return to normal the immune, digestive, sleep and reproductive systems can be overwhelmed and thus impact the functioning of these systems. In time, continued stress may contribute to serious problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, anxiety and depression.

4. Stress can be managed

Over time the effects of stress can build up. Practical steps to manage stress include:

- Recognize the signs of your body's response to stress
- Talk to your health care provider
- Get regular exercise (30 minutes daily)
- Try a relaxing activity
- Set goals and priorities
- Stay connected with others

5. Ask for help

If you are overwhelmed, feeling like you can't cope or are using drugs or alcohol to cope, you should ask for help immediately. To find a mental health provider near you go to:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml>.

Additional Resources for Stress in Early Care and Education:

Managing Stress: Taking Care of Children and Yourself!

<http://www.childhealthonline.org/Stress%20Management%20handout.pdf>

National Association for the Education of Young Children

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

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

For more information on self-care for early care and education professionals, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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