

ALICE STERLING HONIG

little kids  
BIG WORRIES



STRESS-BUSTING TIPS  
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

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STRESS-BUSTING TIPS  
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

by

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by Alice Honig, Ph.D.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A special Early Childhood Lifetime Achievement Award was presented in 2004 to Dr. Honig by the Syracuse Association for the Education of Young Children. The New York State Association for the Education of Young Children in 2005 gave Dr. Honig its “Champion of Children Lifetime Achievement Award.” Dr. Honig was honored in 2008 with the Central New York State Psychological Association’s Annual award given: “In Recognition of Outstanding Lifetime Contribution and Service.” For over a decade, Dr. Honig co-conducted workshops for The Onondaga County Mental Health Association to help parents with child custody issues. As a licensed New York State psychologist, she counsels parents and assesses children’s

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# CHAPTER 1

## UNDERSTANDING STRESS IN CHILDREN'S LIVES



Teachers are well aware that children, young as they are, may well have emotional troubles and mental health issues. Teachers witness strong angry outbursts, signs of fears and phobias, and defiant behaviors that signal sorrowful stressors in a child's life. Many stresses exist for children in our rushed and technologically complex society. Some children have continuing health issues, such as chronic asthma or illness.

Some are acutely worried about school issues, such as bullying or struggling with learning problems that leave a lasting legacy of worry. Losses are a sorrowful source of stress in children's lives. In today's world, stresses from a family member's death may be rare, but stresses from abandonment by a well-loved family member occur; for example, a child loses contact with a parent who feels it is too painful to maintain family contact after a difficult divorce. Even some daily hassles, such as when a substitute caregiver arrives and a cautious child feels quite upset, present us with the challenge of how we can ease a child's distress.

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Stress is currently such a prominent concern for parents and providers that web sites now offer daily advice for handling stress. The Child Care Lounge e-mail site (2006) posted its reasons for addressing stress issues:

I think we like to visualize childhood as a time that is carefree and innocent. The truth is young children are not always isolated or immune to trauma and day-to-day stress. Some stress is normal but more and more children are impacted by it. (p. 1)

Children's cartoons are even taking note that toddlers may be affected by stress, as in the cartoon featuring the infant Marvin. A young toddler friend, sitting with Marvin in a baby wading pool, communicates (by cartoon bubble!) that he is already feeling under "an extraordinary amount of pressure"!

Adults who face mild daily hassles or more acute stresses fortunately possess a large repertoire of coping techniques. Adults use cognitive skills to plan ahead to avoid stress. They make alternate plans. When snarled traffic blocks the usual highway to their job, most adults do not go into road-rage mode. They figure out how to get off the highway and take an alternate route so that they can get to work on time. Teachers who recognize worrisome stresses in a child are good detectives and good thinkers. They use a variety of strategies to galvanize assistance, such as alerting the administrator and consulting with the school counselor.

Young children, in contrast, are just beginning to develop the thinking and emotional skills that permit them to adjust to unexpected changes. Even small changes are hard for young children. Parents might be puzzled about why a baby, who has experienced a change in providers every few months, is acting cranky and obstinate every morning. They feel exasperated. Why can't he just accept these changes the family felt that they had to make? The crying child who fusses about being left at the new place is expressing inner stress and a lack of ability to cope with these changes. He is using the only tool he has to communicate stress: upset crying. Parental understanding will help. Caregivers' gentle persistence in winning a young child's basic trust (Erikson, 1950) will be of crucial help.

## DEFINING STRESS

What is stress? Why do we need to be concerned about stressors in the lives of children and their child care providers? *Stress* 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 (Honig, 1986a). Selye (1982), the father of stress research, defined *stress* more specifically as a stimulus event that is severe enough to produce disequilibrium in the homeostatic physiological systems.

Sources of stress abound. They arise from biological or medical risks (e.g., prematurity, cerebral palsy), personal or social factors (e.g., lack of warm, responsive parenting), family circumstances (e.g., maternal depression, lack of father support for mother), and sociodemographic factors (e.g., living in a dangerous neighborhood with bullets flying from gang fights) (Honig, 1986b). Child stresses have long-lasting negative consequences. Stresses from personal interactions, such as persistent peer rejection, isolation, and peer bullying, cause severe and lasting stress and developmental difficulties from ages 5 to 12 (Ladd, 2006; Lines, 2008; Zins, Elias, & Maher, 2007).

Studies over many decades of infants born at risk on the island of Kauai (Werner & Smith, 1992) revealed that those adults who grew up *resilient* had experienced a loving relationship as babies with their moms during the first year and a close consistent relationship with her during early childhood. Relationships with loving, intimate persons are crucial for preventing stress and for ameliorating risk factors that stress young children. This book provides many vignettes and personal examples of how children express stress and how insightful and caring teachers can alleviate those stresses.

## CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORS REVEAL STRESS IN THEIR LIVES

We need to watch children's body language as well as listen to their words to become more aware of stress. Body responses are helpful signposts. They confirm emotional vulnerabilities and inner distress even when young children are not able to tell us in words. How do children's bodies and behavior show us their distress? A child's eyes widen and the brow wrinkles with worry lines. A baby who is usually bouncy has limbs that feel floppy or stiff and rigid. A child chews and sucks on the ends of her hair as she sits at her desk in school with hunched over shoulders. A young child's eyes are dull or angry looking. The child's face is unsmiling (Koplow, 1996). A child's jaw aches from grinding teeth at naptime. Frequent constipation or diarrhea without any medical reason can indicate stress. Some children earnestly report a terrible tummyache that miraculously disappears if a parent says the child can

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**Table 1.1** Child Stress: Behaviors and body signals

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Are the young children in your care thriving emotionally? Perceptive awareness and monitoring of baby and toddler behaviors is your first line of defense against emotional troubles. The following body cues, especially when you see several in the same child, indicate that the child's mental health may be in jeopardy.

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- Dull, unsparkling eyes
  - Back arching and body stiffening as a regular response
  - Avoidance of eye contact
  - Pushing away from rather than relaxed body molding to the caregiver
  - Limp, floppy, listless body
  - Rare smiles despite tender adult elicitation
  - Compulsive body rocking, thumb sucking, self-stimulation
  - Inconsolable crying for long periods
  - Scattered attention during intimate exchanges with caregiver
  - Apathetic facial expression
  - Lack of empathy—impassiveness or anger when a peer is hurt or distressed
  - Lack of responsiveness to warm adult overtures
  - Long and frequent temper tantrums
  - Fearful withdrawal or flinching from caregiver's caress
  - Anxious shadowing of or clinging to provider even after months in care
  - Regular avoidance of or indifference to parents at pickup time
  - Continuous biting or hitting of others without provocation
  - Little or no interest in peers or others
  - Grimaces of despair
  - Going too easily between adults with no sign that any one caregiver is special
  - Persistent head banging against crib
  - Tendency to run off, heedless of the caregiver's presence as a safe base
  - Aimless wandering; inability to focus or settle into constructive play
  - Reckless actions that endanger the child; lack of awareness of body limits
  - Overly anxious or overly compliant with adults
  - Oversolicitousness toward adults—parentification
- 

If you observe a child showing clusters of the behaviors listed above, work with family members to alleviate the child's stress. In some cases you may need to help families connect with community resources to support the emotionally distressed child.

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Adapted, with permission, from Honig, A.S. "Mental Health for Babies: What Do Theory and Research Teach Us?" *Young Children* 48 (March 1993), 72. [As adapted in A.S. Honig, *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant/Toddler Attachment in Early Care Settings*, (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2002), 33.]

then stay home from school. Some children do not say anything defiant or angry but avoid eye contact persistently and give adults sullen looks whenever asked to do something. A child whose parent is away at war may act far more subdued and clingy with the parent left at home. Table 1.1 provides a list of some telltale signs of stress in young children (Honig, 1986b, p. 160).

## SIGNS OF STRESS VARY IN INTENSITY AND DURATION

Some stress reactions are brief. Others last a long while. Stress behaviors can be disturbingly dramatic. Evie pulls out clumps of her own hair (trichotillomania) and leaves large bald spots on her head. Barrie bursts into lengthy, terrifying temper tantrums; he holds his breath and almost turns blue when told he cannot have a candy so temptingly displayed near the supermarket checkout counter. Jeremy becomes furiously angry and screams at another child, whom he perceives as interfering with his play activity.

Jamal was building a tower of large plastic blocks. Sitting nearby and watching the tower going up, Bettina tried helpfully to steady a wobbly block that Jamal had plunked down without adjusting its balance on top of the block below. Jamal smacked her hand away, frowned, and screamed at this helpful gesture, as if Bettina were trying to interfere and even perhaps deprive him of his own building activity. She withdrew her hand and looked worried. Jamal continued building his wobbly tower.

Not all children show us their inner stress by overt behaviors. Some manifest subtler ways of showing that adults are overpowering or intrusive in their lives. Negativism is sometimes developmentally appropriate, and sometimes it is a sign of distress. Toddlers learning to say *no* are asserting their newly growing feelings of competence and independence. They are right on target developmentally.

“Larry, it is time for lunch,” called out Ms. Ali. Bright eyed, Larry ran to the other end of the room, calling out “No, no, no.” Then he turned and gave his caregiver a dazzling smile as if she too should share in his delight at being able to express his own independence. She smiled and remarked, “Mmm, yummy meat; yummy carrots!” and the toddler happily ran over to his high chair.

However, some preschoolers and school-age children say *no* a lot even to reasonable and cheerful adult requests. This may be a sign that a child feels he or she must defend himself against feelings of too many adult pressures or conflicting adult orders. Teachers who want to gain insights into how children are sometimes buffeted by too many adult orders can listen in public spaces to family talk that reveals the source of some children's conflicted feelings of being ordered about too much. Here is one such conversation overheard:

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After eating his meal, 6-year-old Donny had taken off his shoes in anticipation of enjoying the children's section of the fast-food restaurant, where he could play on the enclosed climbers. "Come here, your shirt is crooked," called his father. Donny frowned and ran back to the table. His father adjusted the shirt, and then Donny trotted back to the play space. "Don't run," called his mother, "You will fall!" "Careful climbing, do you hear me?" ordered his father. "Come here. I want to check your socks," Mom called. Donny ran back and forth, trying to be obedient. His brows were knit, and his face looked sober and upset. He felt like a puppet being jerked on a string.

---

## HOW ADULTS HANDLE A CHILD'S STRESS

Suppose a child confides that the grown-ups in the family always decide for her but never ask her what she wants when they are bringing her for child care to one relative or another. "I really want to be with my Grandpa when they are going out, but my parents never ask me about *my* feelings," the child confides to a sympathetic teacher in a discouraged tone. How should the adult respond? One teacher may listen quietly; another teacher confirms verbally the child's longing that grown-ups ask her more about her wishes. A teacher could also ask the child care center's director to invite the parents in for a friendly talk about how well the child is getting along at the center as well as the relationships at home that seem to make her feel really happy.

Adults call children stubborn or uncooperative when they defend their needs against too much adult pressure. Baby Billy holds food in his

check pouches and refuses the spoon with tightly pursed lips when he feels that he is being fed too fast or too much.

Teachers become aware of how children defend their autonomy by saying *no* in the classroom well beyond their toddler years. Insightful teachers find ways to empower a young child, whose response to feeling thwarted or helpless in the face of perceived overwhelming and sometimes arbitrary adult power is to act stubborn.

Different parenting styles are associated with different behavioral outcomes. When children feel under too much pressure from authoritarian parents, they may be compliant and obedient at home but act out aggressively and noncompliantly in the classroom. Baumrind (1971) noted three major types of parenting in her research. *Authoritarian parents* are not warm. They value control and unquestioning obedience to rules. They punish children forcefully for violating their rules. Their attitude of “Do as I say because I am your parent” proclaims that they have all the rights; children have all the responsibilities. Their children tend to be more distrustful. *Permissive parents* are warm, noncontrolling, and make few demands on children. Their children tend to be more immature and the least self-controlled. *Authoritative parents* have high expectations, act loving and accepting, show genuine personalized interest in their children, and explain rules and expectations that they require. Their preschoolers tend to be the most self-reliant, contented, and self-controlled. Children who show strong upset in mild encounters with peers or strong negativism well into the preschool years may be experiencing less effective rearing styles at home.

Howie, 5 years old, often says that he is not hungry and does not want lunch. His kindly provider is puzzled when he strongly refuses her offers of his favorite foods. She notices perceptively that he acts quite cranky from hunger just prior to lunchtime. The provider does not force or nag him. However, when the others are already eating and he sees a food he really does like, then he suddenly and urgently demands that food. His teacher also notices that his interactions with the other children in the classroom are far more cheerful after he has eaten.

Caregivers do need to know many techniques and ways to handle child stress in order to nurture more positive developmental outcomes. But

the first helping step is to enhance awareness of the myriad ways in which stress manifests itself in young children. It is easy to recognize that a child in a temper tantrum is upset. We also need to tune in to the many other ways children tell us about inner distress. Florence has to wait after her center closes for a driver to pick her up and take her to a sitter for a few hours, because her parents have long working hours that extend beyond the time that the center operates. Adults supervise her safe transfer. Florence bites her lips nervously and says that she has to “go pee” every few minutes while waiting for the transfer. This transfer is a daily procedure, but it nevertheless stresses this child.

## TEACHERS AND STRESS

What about stress in teacher’s lives? Stresses occur in everyone’s life, including the personal lives of care providers. Stresses occur among staff members, or between a caregiver and a parent, in addition to adult frustrations when children behave in puzzling or inappropriate ways. So endemic is stress in society that if we look at web sites and daily e-mails, every day brings a message of how adults can reduce their stress and what products they can purchase, from aromatherapy bath products to advertisements for yoga lessons! Colleges are addressing stress issues among students and offering courses to combat stress. One such course is called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to teach young adults faced with life stresses to practice “open, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment, by dealing in a more balanced way with what arrives” (Syracuse University, 2006, p. 7). The last two chapters of this book provide ideas for decreasing stress in the lives of child care providers and teachers and provide ideas about when to and how to utilize outside help such as mental health professionals.

## SHORT-TERM STRESSORS

Short-term stress is not always negative. Actually, a *moderate* amount of stress alerts a person, enhances memory, and heightens the chance to forge ahead in thinking of ways to improve the stressful situation. Stress has been conceptualized by the head of the neuroendocrinology laboratory at Rockefeller University as a positive experience if a person has a feeling of control and satisfaction. That person faces and accepts a challenge that he or she is determined to struggle to overcome (McEwen, 2002).

A teacher on vacation is determined to walk most of the Appalachian Trail over a few weeks of vacation time. The trail is often difficult and has discomforts. But at the end of the trip the teacher feels victorious and exhilarated.

Even for children, mild stresses can actually lead to joy and feelings of competence when their efforts to overcome the stress are successful.

An older toddler, frustrated with struggling hard to learn to whistle for weeks, suddenly succeeded! Early one morning, he stood up and held on to the bars of his crib, which was in his parents' bedroom. Crowing with triumph and waking his startled parents, he called out "I dooed it; I dooed it!" and produced a recognizable whistling sound.

A kindergartener had been worrying for weeks in class. He kept trying to figure out how to recognize and find a rhyme after the teacher had taught that *words that rhyme end in the same sound*. Although he felt frustrated, he worked hard with his teacher's gentle and positive encouragement. A few weeks later, when she asked the children, "Tell me a part of your face that rhymes with *rose*," he grinned with joy and called out "nose!" This learning challenge was mildly stressful, but it galvanized him to try and succeed. And he did!

Some situations that have been regarded as very difficult or stressful for children really do not have adverse consequences. Research at the University of Maryland has shown that busy schedules for children with music or ballet lessons, sports activities, play dates, and so forth are not by themselves stressful. The children reacted negatively not to busy schedules but indeed felt stressed by parental criticisms and severe pressures to excel (St. George, 2008).

Are short-term stresses easier to cope with? Some short-term stresses are mild, such as a child's forgetting to take his homework back to school on the day it is due and getting scolded by the teacher. Even mild stresses may cause temporary troubles. A mild stress, such as moving a preschooler to a new room to make her room into a nursery for the new

baby to be born, may disappear fairly quickly. Some adults are quite adept at anticipating any such stress before it discomforts the child too much. They provide calm, loving explanations. They enlist the child to help redecorate the new room to which she or he is being moved. They make the child feel proud of growing up so that the coming change seems a positive rather than a worrisome event to anticipate. But adults have to think about a stressor in terms of *how the child views the event* rather than from an adult perspective. For example, a stress that might seem mild to adults but may cause sorrow for a child occurs when the family of his best friend next door moves far away. When young children in group care are moved to the next older classroom together with their friends, then stress is decreased. Yet a center often has rigid rules to move children at certain ages, or when they become mobile, from one group care room to the next.

Although time limited, even a one-time severe stress can have lingering effects. Suppose a teacher or child suddenly falls quite ill while in the classroom, and a sensitive preschooler sobs in terror. An angry child hurls a toy, hits another child, and causes bleeding. A stress may be acute, such as when a toddler screams as a dog on the street jumps on him. But this intensely fearful episode may have long-term consequences. The teacher notices for weeks afterward that this child withdraws fearfully and will not even go near the cage with a small, gentle gerbil.

## LONG-TERM STRESSORS

Some stresses are long term. Long-term stress occurs when a person feels he or she does not have the capability to resolve the stress or control the stressful situation. The consequences are biologically harmful. During such stressful situations our bodies release adrenaline, which speeds up heart rate, increases blood pressure, and prepares our bodies for emergency actions. Poverty is a long-term stressor for many children. In the United States, more than 13 million children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level of \$21,200 annual income. Poverty stresses parents. Family poverty increases child stress when parents lack resources and energy to supply the quintessential love and cherishing that children need (Cauthen & Fass, 2008).

Long-term stressors for children may be *indirect* rather than direct. A child with recurring cancer is hospitalized frequently. His siblings feel worried and neglected. They express resentment that their parents are busy with the needs of the very ill child and often not emotionally available for them. In addition, they feel guilty, because they realize how sick the sibling is. Another child moves from one crowded shelter to another



with his homeless mother and siblings. He suddenly has to change schools. Worry, bewilderment, and stress are pervasive for this child.

## Divorce

Divorce is a frequent stressor for young children. In some cases, divorce does bring to an end the ongoing fights and tension that have worried a child. But in many cases, divorce has proved a long-term stressor. Some parents fight bitterly for custody of a child; they hurl contempt-filled and hurtful accusations about one another to the children. The children start to fight a lot with each other and with friends. Therapists and researchers observe that in families experiencing these hardships, the long-term stressors from acrimonious divorce and custody battles result in a child's plummeting grades, sadness, fights with peers on the playground, bedwetting, and even nightmares and interpersonal sorrows later in adult life (Marquardt, 2005; Wallerstein, 1987; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Ongoing parental feuds and hatreds after divorce can affect preschool staff as well as the child. A handsome 3-year-old, loved by each parent, confided sadly to his preschool teacher, "Nobody is my friend." He felt so lonely in the class. His parents were continuing their bitter divorce fight for years afterward, and each tried to enlist the teachers into taking sides in their psychological battles.

Some time-limited stressors still feel traumatic to children already beset by the stress of divorce. A stepfather's new wife has a baby, and a child worries that she will not be loved as much as the new baby they are doting upon. Or she fears that there will no longer be room for her to sleep at their home. A mother's boyfriend is babysitting and inappropriately sexually touches the young child, saying that this is their secret. The child begins to act nervous and shrinks from her teacher's touch in the classroom (Gordon, 1983).

## Dislocations and Relocations

Dislocations and relocations of living sites are scary for children. In war zones, children flee into crowded refugee camps. Their grave faces and clinging ways speak volumes about inner stress. Even when a refugee or immigrant family finds safe refuge in a new country with a different language, a child's emotional distress from dislocation in space and in culture may last over a longer period of time.

For children in military families whose parents are often deployed overseas, relocation can be a significant source of stress. The children are faced with the sudden departure of a parent whom they worry is going off to a dangerous place. The parent's new assignment may be a locale

that their children may have seen portrayed on television as a place with bombings and killing. Relocation during times of peace can be likewise stressful for these children. They move to a new apartment in a new town and have no friends at first in a new school. Such relocations can cause heartache and worry. Children may exhibit acting out behaviors such as bedwetting, bullying, or other telltale signals of distress.

Garbarino (2008) has illuminated with striking examples from across the world the stresses that children experience living in difficult circumstances, such as social conditions of fear and brutality, exposure to war and terror, or life in displaced-persons camps. He reminds us that unless we care enough to ameliorate stresses in children's lives everywhere, the later consequences for children can be sad and atrocious, such as youth-group violence, teen prostitution, drug abuse, and the perpetuation of violence in future generations.

## Abandonment: The Strongest Source of Stress for Children

Grief at death or loss of a child's beloved parent or close sibling often brings forth depressive child symptoms. Strong fears of further abandonment impel worrisome child behaviors. They imperil school learning and cause overly cautious behaviors (Bowlby, 2000).

Ashley, a 5-year-old, was behaving "super good" all the time. The mother smugly remarked on what a good child she had. The family therapist quietly asked the mother to think about the fact that she had willingly agreed to give the other parent custody of the older sibling. The extremely well-behaved little girl was acting on her secret worries. If Ashley were not always a good child, then maybe Mommy too would disappear from her life, just as Daddy and her older sister had done.

Such fears can mark a child with stress over many years.

## SEVERE STRESS AND BRAIN CHANGES IN CHILDREN

When stress is chronic and unrelieved during the early years of life, not only a child's personality and behaviors but also the brain undergo

harmful effects. When the body is overexposed to cortisol, adrenaline, norepinephrine, and other stress chemicals, brain cells are damaged. Raised levels of stress hormones cause the hippocampus, the brain's moderator of memories, to atrophy. Dr. Bruce Perry (1999), a child psychiatrist who has treated thousands of children who have been neglected and abused, underscored the gravity of atrophy of the hippocampus—the seat of memory. Children, who need all of their brain capacity for early learning, are at particular risk from long-term, chronic stressors such as family violence. Loving, intimately nurturing caregivers are the first line of defense against overwhelming child stressors of neglect and abuse. Dr. Perry (2002) has been explicit on how harmful the effects of severe stressors can be on a child's developing brain.

Children need to have both stable emotional attachments with and touch from primary adult caregivers, and spontaneous interactions with peers. If these connections are lacking, brain development both of caring behavior and cognitive capacities is damaged in a lasting fashion. The impacts of technology have spawned declines in extended families, family meals, and spontaneous peer interactions. The latter changes have deprived many children of experiences that promote positive growth of the cognitive and caring potentials of their developing brains. (p. 79)

Perry (1994) categorized parental neglect as a damaging *catastrophe*, a long-lasting child stress that causes negative changes in brain patterns. Some children cannot even remember the pain they have undergone. They blank out early experiences. Michael, a star football player whose father had been murdered and whose mother was a crack addict, had lived in many foster homes. While in high school, college football teams courted him for his awesome football skills. He had learning difficulties and required intensive and massive daily doses of tutoring help. When his nurturing adoptive mother asked about his past, he could not respond. He had wiped out childhood memories as a way to cope with ever-present stresses in his past. "Michael spent his whole life as a problem to be covered up" (Lewis, 2006, p. 112).

## STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECTS CHILDREN'S BODY PHYSIOLOGY

The consequences of severe stress when they are prolonged and involved include many somatic symptoms. This syndrome is called *posttraumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). Some symptoms are chronic sleep interruptions, horrifying flashbacks in memory, sudden angers, and nonphysical bodily sensations that feel crippling, such as fiery arm aches

or headaches. Dissociation, obsessive ruminations, or the opposite where memories of the traumatic happenings are wiped out are also typical in PTSD. About one third of soldiers returning from serving in the Iraq war are diagnosed with PTSD and in need of mental health services. Some children who have been assaulted or neglected suffer from signs of PTSD. They space out in the classroom and seemingly do not hear the teacher. In a therapy session they compulsively act out the trauma again and again. Right after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, teachers reported that some preschoolers were setting up tall block towers and pretending to bomb them with toy airplanes until the blocks crashed down, over and over.

What does chronic severe stress do to a body? During a stressful event, the adrenal gland releases adrenaline. This accelerates the heart rate and increases breathing and blood pressure. Adrenaline alerts and prepares the body to fight or flee. The adrenal gland also releases cortisol. Cortisol goes to the brain to help lodge the stressful event in memory and also to keep the emergency response going. Norepinephrine “is the caveman fight-or-flight chemical. It’s what tells you to tangle with a saber-toothed tiger or hightail it to safety out of your hut” (Roizen & Oz, 2006, p. 134). Usually, after a stressful event is over the body returns to normal. What happens when a child’s body is under stress continually from severe daily criticism, threats, or physical punishments? The adrenal system remains active.

Chronic stress shortens caps, called *telomeres*, which are chunks of DNA at the ends of chromosomes. Stress shortens telomeres and leads to premature cell aging. Such shortening of telomeres was found in mothers who spent lengthy time caring for chronically ill children and who perceived themselves as highly stressed. Their white blood cells also showed more aging than other women the same age without such stress burdens (Cheney, 2006).

Severe stresses from chronic neglect or abuse cause the body to produce much higher levels of cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine. Blood pressure is elevated and there is more chance for clogged arteries (atherosclerosis). Perry (1993) teaches that if an aggravated adult habitually scolds a child who has been abused or neglected, that child may show freeze, flight, or fight responses. A care provider might interpret the freezing response as the child ignoring her and paying no attention to what she has said. Caregivers need to be alert to the three responses described as typical consequences of child abuse or neglect stress.

A prison psychologist interviewed hundreds of convicted delinquent youth (Welsh, 1976). The youth gave detailed descriptions about parental discipline methods in their childhood. Independently, judges

rated the severity of each of the criminal actions for which each youth was convicted. The more that parents had used severe physical punishment in childhood, the more severe were the delinquent actions the youth were convicted of, as rated by the independent judges.

Chaotic and hurtful childhoods lead to worrisome personality outcomes such as aggression and predatory violence in adulthood as well as drug abuse and victimization. These findings are widespread in many cultures. Researchers in New Zealand reported that poverty, witnessing violence at home, and bullying at school are significant risk factors for child depression (Denny, Clark, Fleming, & Wall, 2004).

Furthermore, some children, scolded and ridiculed for years, learn to distrust their own actions, judgments, and decisions. They have so frequently had the experience of negative consequences from family as a consequence of their actions. Plagued by low and unstable self-images, these children grow up to become gullible, duped by others, and victims of promotional scams, false advertising, and unscrupulous friends. They are apt to give false confessions and become followers of religious cults (Graceffo, 2006).

## STRESSES HAVE MULTIPLICATIVE EFFECTS

Stresses in a child's life do not just add up; they multiply their worrisome effects. Rutter (1996), an English psychiatrist, suggested that there is a quadratic or threshold effect of stress. That is, after an individual reaches his or her stress threshold, there is a four-fold jump in developmental problems if more stresses are piled on a child. Researchers have investigated whether the *number of stressors* or the *variety of contexts* where stresses occur, such as school, home, or neighborhood, would affect children differently. For low-income elementary school children, context was not as important as number. Regardless of where they were stressed, the *cumulative number of stressors* provoked more negative child outcomes (Morales & Guerro, 2006). The researchers reported, "The accumulation of stressors, irrespective of their context, was related to small to moderate decreases in achievement, moderate increases in depression, and large increases in aggression" (p. 919).

## PERCEPTION OF STRESSORS VARIES WITH INDIVIDUALS

Children differ in perception of threats from stressors. Although there are myriad sources of stress in children's lives, perception of stress varies

among children. When a hungry and tired toddler is digging in with both hands while eating, even being sharply reminded at lunchtime to use a spoon can cause tension. Toilet learning causes fearful worries for some youngsters. Some toddlers fear being sucked down into a big toilet. If not allowed to use a small potty set safely on the floor, toilet learning is traumatic for them, and they may fiercely resist the most patient efforts.

Different kinds of stressors and how they are perceived *vary greatly with child developmental level*. Walking in the wintry dusk to the supermarket parking lot with a baby in arms, a mom stiffens in terror when an armed felon accosts her. However, the baby may even smile upon seeing the funny gesticulations and waving gun that the felon is pointing! Yet a few years later that same child will sob and scream if such an attack occurs.

## Gender and Stress

Some stressors affect boys and girls differently. Very young males, compared with females, show more vulnerability to deprivation of maternal warmth (Martin, 1981). First-grade teachers rated boys with an extensive history of child care as more disobedient, quarrelsome, and uncooperative than children without such a history (Robertson, 1982). Howes (1999) pointed out that the quality of home care as well as child care may well affect such findings. Yet researchers have found that boys have a greater risk of difficulties in social adjustment, compared with girls, after many years of nonfamilial child care (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development–Early Childhood Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2001, 2006).

Gender effects showed up in a study of Israeli classrooms for 4-year-olds who had already been in child care for a considerable period of time. In this nonrisk sample of preschoolers, some of the classes had a higher ratio of teachers per child and others had fewer teachers per child (Bornstein, Hahn, Gist, & Haynes, 2006). When there were fewer adults for the group, the boys proved far more emotionally vulnerable than the girls. Their teachers reported that those boys exhibited “more externalizing and internalizing problems, which are characterized generally by lower attentional regulation, inhibitory control, and delay of gratification as well as higher impulsivity, and which include symptoms of anxiety and depression” (p. 147). The girls’ behaviors did not reveal these worrisome outcomes whether they experienced fewer or more caregivers in their child care group. Head Start boys, but not girls, were more likely to act hostile and aggressive if there was teacher–child conflict (Ewing & Taylor, 2009). In this study, only gender differences, but not ethnic differences, were related to child stress.

Directors will want to alert teachers to the emotional needs of little boys, and their need for nurturing interactions. Many adults have been taught that boys are stronger than girls and do not need as many loving cuddles. Caregivers need to realize how much young males need their nurturing care.

## NOTICING STRESS: A SUBTLE ART

Teachers and care providers know that they have to be skilled in keeping young children safe and be able to prepare curricular experiences to motivate children to become zestful learners. Yet those individuals teaching and caring for children need to know a lot about children's emotional development and especially how to counteract the effects of stressors. Kicking, biting, screaming—these are easy to interpret as child stress responses. But many signs of child stress are subtler. A teacher told me that during the past year she had a student who daydreamed, looking out of the window rather than paying attention in class. The teacher had made many sarcastic comments to the girl. At the end of the year she found out that the girl was being pressured into an untenable sexual situation at home and felt that she had nobody to talk to. Before assuming a school-age child is not cooperating in class, adults need to think of secret or not-so-secret stresses that may be influencing that child's behaviors.

An important illustration of how differently children perceive stress was revealed in the variety of mental health outcomes reported among children of the London Blitz during the Second World War, when German V-2 rockets obliterated parts of London. Many families sent their children to live with strangers in the countryside so that the children would be safe from the bombs. Families whose children remained with them hurried down to the deep underground train platforms as soon as the sirens screamed their warnings of an imminent bombing attack. The children sent away were found to suffer more bedwetting and nightmares. Stresses were less and mental health better for those children who had to go to sleep lying on the cold subway station floor but close to a loved parent or neighbor. The presence of loving, well-known adults proved a mediating bulwark for children against the terrors and stresses of the Nazi Blitz. Children may *perceive* life difficulties differently, but caring adults remain the precious persons who can create and provide mitigating factors to decrease stress.

Different ways of perceiving stress as devastation or opportunity can be found among adults too. Suppose a person loses a job, takes that

opportunity to get an educational grant, goes for further training, and then finds a much more satisfying position. A different person losing a job might be confronted by an angry spouse, feel bitter and ashamed, worry over how to pay bills, and start drinking heavily.

Some changes in life are viewed as stressful even when positive, such as the excitement (and burden) of preparing for a big family get-together at the holiday season. Perception is critical. Do we view a change or a stressful happening as something to shrug off, as an interesting challenge, something we can live through, or do we perceive it as scary, infuriating, and acutely upsetting?

Overwhelming stresses, such as torture, are terrible for *all* people. However, children differ in how they perceive ordinary life stresses, whether milder or more troublesome, in their lives.

## VARIATIONS IN RESPONSE TO STRESS

People respond in various ways to life stresses. Children differ not only in their perceptions of stress but also in the *resiliency* of their responses to stress (Honig, 1986a, 1986b, 2009).

Some teachers might think that child disability would invariably impair a child's responses to stress. Yet some typically developing children might be more vulnerable in their capacity to cope with stress compared with a child born with or incurring a later disability. Robert Louis Stevenson, the poet and author of *A Child's Garden of Verses* (Stevenson, 1924), was born quite sickly. His parents, busy with their adult social lives, left him in the care of a Scottish nursemaid who told him many tales. Although chronically sick, he read omnivorously and grew up to become a famous author.

In a fifth-grade classroom, one of the students complimented James, a blind student, on how well he was learning Spanish compared with the other students. She asked why he was so skillful at learning the language compared to his classmates. "Use your ears, girl, use your ears!" the student boomed out jovially in reply. James had learned to compensate for lack of vision by superbly honing his auditory skills to become a successful language student.



School-age children respond in many of the same and in many different ways to emotional troubles. Some children are stressed by being *overprogrammed*; they feel too hurried in life (Elkind, 1981). Some fight. Some steal. A little girl felt neglected emotionally by her father who was always out of the home ministering to families in difficulties. She stole a watch from another girl on a play date at one home. An adult needs to think deeply about the symbolism of the stressful behavior. What does stealing symbolize? “In some cases, the stolen items seem to symbolize a parent’s love, power, or authority, of which the child feels deprived” (Papalia & Olds, 1995, p. 331). Desperate to feel more important, to feel more powerful, and to gain more friends, some children tell whopping lies to impress peers. “My uncle is going to give me a pony for Christmas,” boasted a 6-year-old to his kindergarten classmates. He rarely saw his mother’s brother, who was unemployed at the time.

When children continue to make up fanciful boasts or tell tall tales well into the elementary school years, teachers need to be aware that these tall tales are signals of insecurity. Some children whine a great deal. Others develop school phobias and refuse to go to school. One boy, whose well-educated, loving parents fought often and loudly, refused to go to school for months. His behavior signaled his strong anxious feeling that if only he were home all the time, then maybe he could make sure his parents were all right together.

Deeply afraid of the dark, a child may demand not only a night light but also a fully lighted room to go to sleep. Another child shows strong separation anxiety as he shadows the caregiver; he clings to her clothing for months. Talking with his dad, the teacher finds out that the child had watched a traumatic event—his pet dog had been run over and killed by a car.

## Freudian Defense Mechanisms in Response to Stress

Dr. Freud (1935) explained that we all use special techniques once in a while to ward off anxious feelings. These Freudian defense mechanisms are used commonly to decrease tension, avoid criticism, and feel calmer. Suppose a visiting family member criticizes our housekeeping. Rather than accepting the critical comment philosophically as sometimes true of our housekeeping style, even as adults we react in stressed ways. Feeling angry, we are tempted to lash out *defensively* to cope with our anxious feelings. We may then return an accusation against the accuser as

being sloppy too, or not the greatest at parenting! One 7-year-old whose very strict mother called her a “bad girl” retorted, “*You’re a bad girl!*”

Some children use a more worrisome defense mechanism: *denial*. They say they did not break the item they just broke or hit the child they just slugged. A child might accusingly say that another child did it, “not me!” Blaming others is a defense mechanism called *projection of evil*. When I was a child, my mom read me a story called *Bad Mousie* (Dudley, 1947). The pictures show a little girl whose mouse friend, she claims, is always doing naughty things. He threw all of Donnie’s clean socks into the bathtub when it had water in it. He tipped over orange juice and spilled cocoa. The little girl was told not to touch stuff on Mama’s dresser. Her mother comes into her bedroom and finds perfume spilled all over the floor; Mama finds pots piled up into a tower and crashed all over the floor. She asks what happened. Each time, the little girl earnestly replies that Bad Mousie (rather than herself) has done the naughty deed. Mama tries to send Bad Mousie away, but he always comes back and is naughty once more. Near the end of the story, the little girl teaches him to be neat and careful with stuff and they all live happily together—a convenient fairy tale ending, but not so easy to accomplish in the real world.

Some children use the defense mechanism of *displacement*. If a teacher or parent yells at them, they then turn and fight with a sibling or peer, or kick the dog, as in Viorst’s (1976) story *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. In this story, Mom’s bad feelings because Dad forgot to give mom a loving good-bye in the morning escalate and spill onto her grumpiness with each child, and in turn each acts upset with a younger sibling, and finally the dog gets the brunt of the grumpiness!

When parents use the mechanism of *displacement* (Ayoub, Grace, & Newberger, 1990), the abused child is often the target of displaced anger that breeds in the family:

The child may indeed become a scapegoat for many family problems; he or she thus allows parents to avoid marital difficulties or other family conflicts. . . . Negative messages may be relayed to the child directly or indirectly. Indirect messages can leave the child with no way to respond. For example, a parent repeatedly says, “Good children never wet their beds,” to a child who is a bed wetter. When the child wets his bed, the parent says nothing, but sighs deeply. (p. 235)

We need to learn to recognize a great many Freudian defense mechanisms as they play out in behaviors among children. Asked why he had kicked a child on the playground during earlier recess at school, Jimmy

looked up at the teacher and said, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” Jimmy did not often seem to be lying. But it did seem as if, in fright at being punished, he did *repress* unpleasant episodes. They were not available to his memory.

*Regression* is a defense mechanism that worried young children use. They might demand a baby bottle rather than a glass to drink from after the new baby is born. One kindergarten child soiled his underpants for weeks when a family move in the neighborhood forced him to walk a new and unfamiliar route to his school.

Some children use the mechanism of *sour grapes*. Kylie defiantly tells the teacher, “Anyway, I wouldn’t even want to play with that stupid old baby toy” right after the teacher has just stopped him from grabbing the toy from another child. Psychological *splitting* occurs when a person endows one intimate other (e.g., the new wife) with all the good characteristics and another person (e.g., the former spouse) with all the bad characteristics. If a teacher has had a child from one family in a prior class, the teacher may remember that child as smart and well behaved. When a younger sibling, somewhat mischievous and not as good a student, arrives in that teacher’s class, the younger child may be considered to be a bad child in contrast with the good child the teacher formerly had in class.

Information about the many *defense mechanisms* people use to decrease their own anxiety and stress is empowering. As adults we need to become more aware of when we ourselves are using one defense mechanism or another to protect against feelings of distress. A gentle teacher, Ms. Rosie saw Alex suddenly raise his arm and hit Robbie with a block quite hard on the head. Robbie had been standing close by and looking on with great interest as he watched Alex build with blocks. Alex, using the defense mechanism of *projection of evil*, saw Robbie’s closeness as a threat rather than as a compliment to his building skills. Robbie cried out sharply when hit. The teacher turned to me and said, “Alex must just be tired.” Perhaps she was not sure how to handle this deliberate and sudden hurtful action. Her response showed *denial*—she denied that there had been any aggressive intent, but she needed to tune into Alex’s tendency to be suspicious of other children’s motives and plan for ways to decrease his distress.

## CONCLUSIONS

By addressing the ways in which we ourselves respond to stress, we gain better insights into a particular child who seems impelled to use denial

or frequently accuses others of starting a fuss rather than simply admitting when he or she has done something not in accordance with classroom rules. A big help for caregivers during in-service learning sessions is to role-play effective ways to deal with scenarios such as sudden aggressive interactions.

Be aware, however, that sometimes a child's sudden aggressive actions are long-term consequences of drug exposure in the womb, rather than the consequence of family tensions, rearing styles, or personality. A first-grade teacher called and confided her terrified feelings when a child suddenly picked up a pair of scissors from her desk and tried to stab the neck of the boy sitting in front of her. That child had a history of biological assault (exposure to drugs) in the womb; her mother had taken drugs throughout the pregnancy. Teachers need a store of child development knowledge in order to decode stressful behaviors and to provide safe, nurturing environments for all children in their care.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

What is stress?

Why do we need to be concerned about stressors in the lives of children and their child care providers?

How do children show us that they are stressed? Are there any telltale behavior signs?

What are some examples of short-term stressors and long-term stressors for children?

What are some consequences of prolonged stress on the body?

What are Freudian defense mechanisms, and what are some examples of these mechanisms?