



STRESS-BUSTERS

For Young Children



Little kids can have big worries, too. Help melt their stress away with these 20 practical tips for your early childhood classroom!



1. Set Aside Group Time to Talk About Feelings

Young children need the vocabulary to talk about complex emotions. Teach them words like *proud*, *worried*, *excited*, *frustrated*, and *amazed*, and talk about them during group time. Acknowledge both negative and positive emotions, since every emotion shared provides valuable insight into the child's mind.

2. Be Flexible During Transitions

Transitions are a time when many children feel stressed and overwhelmed. Be flexible as much as possible during transitions. For example, allow kids who prefer to eat slowly to finish their snack at their own pace, and let other students get up and play if they finish first.



3. Show Them Mistakes Are Okay

Everyone makes mistakes when learning new skills and navigating new social situations—even grownups. Owning up to your own small mistakes in the classroom can go a long way toward soothing children's worries when they mix up the rules of a new game or accidentally hurt a friend's feelings.

4. Encourage Conversations with Children from Diverse Backgrounds

Children often feel stressed when they feel alienated from the rest of the class. Help students from diverse backgrounds find common ground by encouraging them to chat about favorite TV shows, games, and hobbies—a great way to help kids look past differences and bring them together.



5. Infuse the Day with Patterns and Rituals

Kids are less likely to feel anxious when routines and patterns are predictable. Use a special greeting each morning to help kids ease into the day. Choose a song that tells kids when it's time to put away toys or use inside voices. Celebrate special events like birthdays with predictable rituals—for example, make it a tradition to have each child tell the birthday boy or girl something nice.





6. Reduce Tensions through Art Activities

Group art activities can provide children with a powerful outlet for their feelings. Art can help kids process dark emotions—a child worried about his father’s illness might draw an ambulance and cover it with brown scribbles that represent his fears. Art can also be a way to express and amplify joy, as children work with bits of bright paper, glitter, stickers, and gloopy paint in vivid colors.

7. Keep a Peace Rose

Keep a silk Peace Rose in your classroom to help resolve conflict. Have the children involved in the conflict take turns holding the rose and describing what happened, how they feel about it, and what they think the solution should be. Ask children to interact directly to solve the problem. When they agree on a solution, have them say together: “We declare peace.”



8. Use Puppets to Model Behavior

Puppets are a fun and effective way to teach peaceful conflict resolution strategies. Collect a cast of puppet characters, give them names like Homer Helper and Frannie Fixer, and make up little skits and dialogues that demonstrate how to resolve problems and help peers who are upset. Model words and behaviors explicitly to support children in adopting kind and helping behaviors.

9. Empathize with Outsized Child Fears

Remember how scary the world often felt when you were a young child? Take an empathetic approach when a child quakes at thunderstorms or fears being abandoned by a trusted parent or caregiver. Even if the child’s fears seem unrealistic or exaggerated to you, approaching him or her with kind understanding will help alleviate stress.



10. Dance During Circle Time

This is a great way to relax tensions and unwind the body! Try slow skating waltzes or lively, stomping music. Let your young learners twirl dreamily or jump and leap to powerful beats. Watch tension flow out of their bodies as children move to the music.



11. Provide Safe Spaces for Vigorous Movement

Kids with high activity needs can feel stressed if they lack opportunities to let off steam. Find creative ways for high-energy children to move vigorously throughout the day. Provide access to tumbling mats, hobbyhorses, jumping games, and safe climbing equipment that give kids an outlet for their natural energy.

12. Use Toys to Encourage Nurturing

Nurturing dolls and stuffed animals is a good way for children to unwind and practice caring behavior. Set up toy cribs where boys and girls can put their “babies” to bed, and water tables where kids can bathe their dolls. Help create caregiving scenarios and praise children for their TLC. (Be sure to provide girl and boy dolls representing different cultural groups.)



13. Care for Plants and Animals Together

Tending to bird feeders, classroom pets, and indoor and outdoor gardens can divert children’s attention from daily stressors and fill them with wonder. Digging and planting can both energize and calm children as they work together, and caring for animals can boost children’s happiness as they learn responsibility.

14. Keep Your Classroom Neat

A little messiness is unavoidable during playtime and activities—toys get scattered on the floor, art supplies clutter tables. But research shows that children feel more secure when things look orderly. To increase children’s sense of calm and security, try to keep toys and supplies neatly stored in their places after activities are over.



15. Involve Children as Classroom Helpers

Enlist children’s help in keeping the classroom tidy, comfortable, and efficient. Get them involved in organizing the classroom, arranging toy storage, and planning special occasions. A happy, orderly classroom environment will decrease stress, and if you praise kids for their helping behaviors, they’ll feel so important and proud!





16. Try a Baking (or Squishing) Activity

Mushing, squeezing, and pounding dough is a therapeutic activity that can help kids process feelings of anger and frustration. If baking isn't an option in your school, let the kids smush and pound dough or clay. They'll let off steam in a safe, wordless way *and* hone their artistic creativity at the same time.

17. Tell Silly Jokes

Laughter releases tension and eases stress—both for you and the kids in your classroom. Tell silly, easy-to-understand jokes throughout the day to get your young learners giggling. When a small mishap occurs, reframe it in a funny way to reduce the stress of the situation and ease worries.



18. Give Children Reasons for Expected Behaviors

Children are less stressed when they feel that requests are reasonable. Share the reasons behind your behavioral expectations and then redirect the child's focus. For example, if a child is bothering a peer, say "It makes Jerry upset when you run your truck over his back when he is lying down. You can have fun driving your truck on the floor instead."

19. Provide Upbeat, Positive Emotional Feedback

Daily doses of upbeat talk and cheerful remarks will give children the positive energy they need to cope with stress. And when you model acceptance of unexpected nuisances (spilled juice, a clogged sink), children will see how to handle stressful situations with grace and good humor.



20. Praise Children for Helping Each Other

Have you noticed kids in your classroom going out of their way to engage a worried or withdrawn peer? Have you seen a child help another through a stressful activity or transition? Be on the lookout for instances of children helping each other during free play and activities. Tell them how proud you are of their positive behavior—and you'll likely see more of it!



Get more tips on boosting children's social-emotional skills at the Brookes Inclusion Lab!

www.brookesinclusionlab.com

