

# Disaster Recovery



## Stress—what teachers can do

Children from disaster-torn homes and families carry a load of worry with them when they enter your care. You may not be able to change the stressful conditions that these children deal with at home, but you can make a difference. You can offer them a safe, comfortable, and accepting place to be while they are in your care. You can be emotionally and physically available for children in your classroom. Here are some ways for you to be an active, guiding teacher.

### **Greet each child warmly every day**

That transition from parent to teacher is an important one. Often mornings are extremely stressful for families. Children may have been yelled at, hurried, and given breakfast in the car. A warm smile or hug as a child walks in the door can go a long way to help a child feel accepted and wanted.

### **Spend time with each child every day**

Even if it's just for one or two minutes, get down on the child's level, make eye contact, listen, and watch.

### **Value each child**

Children learn to value themselves through the eyes (and words) of others. What you say (or don't say) to a child has tremendous impact.

### **Eliminate stressful situations from your classroom and routines**

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my room arrangement simple and easy to move through?

- Are activity areas clearly defined (e.g., art area, block area, reading/quiet area)?
- Do I have a balance of noisy areas (e.g., blocks, dramatic play), and quiet areas (books, manipulatives)?
- Do I promote fundraisers to the whole class when some of my children are facing financial hardships at home (e.g., soup can labels—parents may buy store brands rather than brand-name products to cut food costs)? Do I praise those children who are able to participate in fundraisers in front of those children who cannot?
- Is there a quiet place in the classroom that is available to children when they need to escape for a while?
- Have I planned my day so that it alternates between active and quiet activities, organized projects and free play?
- Do I stick to routine as much as possible so that children know what to expect each day?
- Do I provide for successful transitions? Do I let children know that it will be time to stop or clean up when the bell rings, when the lights go off, or when I sing a song?

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

University Extension

Ames, Iowa

- Do I provide plenty of activities that are unstructured and expressive—playdough, blocks, water table, painting, dramatic play?
- Do I provide activities that offer children numerous opportunities to accomplish tasks that have no right or wrong answers?
- Do I avoid putting children in high pressure situations (e.g., performing before a group, expecting them to complete a task they do not yet have the skills for)?

### **Model appropriate behaviors**

Children who are under stress have difficulty picking up cues from teachers and classmates. Telling a child to do something often is not good enough. Teachers may need to model the correct behaviors (e.g., “Tell Josie with words that you want the truck” often needs to be followed with the teacher saying, “I’ll pretend to be you,—Josie, may I please play with that truck?”). Modeling also can be accomplished through children’s books.

### **Respect children’s need for personal space**

Children under stress (even aggressive children) often feel threatened by others and need a bit more personal space. If possible, arrange seating to provide extra room on either side of children who are under stress. In structured activities, arrange for them to sit or stand between non-threatening, non-aggressive children.

### **Be aware of nonverbal behaviors**

Watch carefully for body language that signals restlessness or frustration and be prepared to offer assistance, change the activity, or redirect the child.

### **Avoid over-stimulation**

Put away toys that are not being used. Reduce the noise level by introducing a quiet activity. Slow down the activity (e.g., roll a ball to a child instead of chasing the child with the ball).

### **Allow for developmental regression and individual differences**

Children who are under stress are often overwhelmed and regress to behaviors that would be exhibited by a younger child.

If a 5-year-old has difficulty interacting with peers, he or she may feel much more comfortable playing alongside others and watching from a distance much as a 3-year-old would.

If a 4-year-old is acting more like a 2-year-old, kicking or biting, you may need to structure his or her activities to be more like those that you would expect a 2-year-old to enjoy (e.g., short term, low frustration level, sensory experiences).

Prepared by Lesia Oesterreich, extension specialist in human development and family studies at Iowa State University.

#### **... and justice for all**

The Iowa Cooperative Extension Service’s programs and policies are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age and disability.

Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Robert M. Anderson, Jr., director, Ames, Iowa. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914.