

Tips for Helping Children Return to Care

1. Expect Stress

a. Within Yourself: Professionally and personally you are experiencing the effects of this pandemic. Additionally, working with young children and managing challenging behaviors can be hard and exhausting. Just a few of the ways you may be responding to these stressors might include feeling irritable, angry, tearful, tired, anxious, or hopeless. Our feelings are contagious. Children react to and reflect the emotional state of their caregivers. It is important that you take care of yourself. When you are regulated the children in your care are more likely to be regulated. Remember to also practice self-compassion as you navigate these challenging times.

b. Within your Child: Children of all age's experience stress, however young children do not have the capacity that adults do in order to cope. Young children may not understand the gravity of the pandemic, and they are negatively affected by it. "Even infants and young children are affected adversely when significant stresses threaten their family and caregiving environments."¹ Unlike adults, young children do not have the ability to think logically and therefore, frightening things can feel more powerful and overwhelming.

2. **Understand Behaviors**: Children respond to stress with a range of behaviors. You may see an increase in overt behaviors e.g. attention seeking. It is also important to look out for covert behaviors as a child may be internalizing their stress e.g. withdrawing. Children may also experience regression and changes in their sleep and eating patterns. Some of the behaviors you can expect to see include being rigid, irritable, noncompliant, attention seeking, aggressive, withdrawn, clingy, frequent crying, needing to be cuddled and held more, trouble separating from parents, and somatic complaints (headache, stomachache).

3. **Connect with the Emotion**: Naming children's feelings helps them tame big emotions. Our brains have two hemispheres. The right is responsible for feelings and emotions and the left for logic and linguistics. Young children are right brain dominated. As adults we can help children integrate their two hemispheres by putting their right brain experiences into left brain words. "Research shows that merely assigning a name or label to what we feel literally calms down the activity of the emotional circuitry in the right hemisphere."² Once calm you can use the left brain to redirect (which might include having a conversation).

a. Name it to Tame it: Name the emotion the child is feeling (or you think they feel). Labeling feelings helps children connect their behavior to their emotions. E.g. "You are sad dad left; you miss him." "I wonder if you are feeling frustrated because at school, we have rest time." Validating emotions

¹ Center on the developing child. "8 Things to Remember about Child Development."
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/8-things-remember-child-development/>

² Siegel, D. J. & Bryson, T.A. (2012). The whole-brain child. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks

does not mean you are approving the misbehavior. You are connecting with the child's feeling in order to calm the child enough to redirect behaviors.

b. Social stories- Social stories are visual reminders usually used to teach children appropriate behavior. Social stories can help children understand and respond to emotions. E.g. "We all had to stay at home because of the virus. Now it is safe enough to come back to school. You may have some big feelings about being here at school. I am here to support you with all those feelings."

4. **Commit to Consistency Predictability and Structure:** The brain thrives on predictable patterns. Right now, we are all trying to cope with unpredictability. This is especially challenging for children. Creating rhythm to our day and knowing what to expect next provides a sense of safety.
- a. Routines: Explain the class routines to children. Have predictable rituals like morning circle and transition songs and verses. Did your class have a clear and predictable routine before the pandemic? If not, having a routine in place when children reenter care is important.
 - b. Reminders: Remember to remind children a transition is coming up and what the expectations are e.g. "in five minutes we will line up for snack", "at school I/the teacher knows you are ready to eat when you sit in your chair."
 - c. Making transitions successful: Use a visual schedule that children can reference throughout the day. Try using other sensory cues to make children aware of a transition e.g. sand timer, ringing a bell, dimming lights, singing a song. Be mindful of how many times in a day you are asking children to transition.
 - d. Choices and Limits: Now more than ever, children have very little power and may try to exert control in disruptive ways. Simultaneously, children need clear limits as having too much control is overwhelming. Give children a sense of agency within parameters. Try giving a child two positive choices e.g. "it's circle time, would you like to sit on the blue or green square?" And tell them what they do have control of e.g. "you can pick where you want to sit at lunchtime."

If you have questions or concerns, call our warm line at 303-245-4418.

