

Managing Stress: Caring for Children and Yourself!



Suggestions For Directors

- Explain your program work procedures to staff. Give them opportunity to ask questions. Staff should clearly understand policies.
- Be sure staff know policy and procedures regarding guidance and discipline of children or managing children's behavior.
- Policies and procedures should include clear direction on how to deal with conflicts with parents.
- Give staff "ownership" in their work. Ask what they feel would help them do their jobs better. Give them the resources they need to do their work well.
- Be available to help staff when they need you. Encourage staff to suggest solutions to problems and implement them.
- Review the amount and type of work each caregiver is expected to do. Make sure it is reasonable.
- Observe caregivers regularly. Let them know what they are doing well and what needs to be improved. Offer advice on how to improve (constructive criticism).
- Provide staff training. Develop a career ladder, if possible.
- Encourage good working relationships. Immediately investigate disagreements to determine the source and find solutions. A solution may be as simple as explaining a procedure.
- Advocate for fair provider salaries.

Remember – stress is developmental. Just as a young child may experience stress over kindergarten, and an adult may feel stress over finances and taxes. Caregivers experience stress in a similar developmental way.

- New caregivers may be uncomfortable with basic caregiving techniques, such as proper diapering, feeding, documentation, or sanitation.
- More experienced caregivers are probably comfortable with basic caregiving, but may experience stress over conflicts with parents or coworkers.

Effective directors are aware of the experience, competencies, and potential stressors of each teacher or caregiver. Staff turnover is common in early childhood programs, so staff will generally have different levels of stressors.

Healthy CHILDCare Magazine: “Keeping Stress Manageable”

So you just read this headline and laughed to yourself! “Stress manageable?” “No way!” Stress among childcare providers is inevitable. Juggling children, parents, staff, budgets, equipment, meetings, and more does mean stress. And “stress,” as we call it, is not always bad. However, too much “stress,” or “uncontrolled” or “unmanaged” stress in a childcare setting often affects the quality of care given to the children. A caregiver who feels “stressed out” may not be able to offer the nurturing environment that children need. So what can you do to help you and your staff, as well as yourself, cope with the daily pressures in childcare?

First of all, recognize what causes stress or anxiety in a childcare setting: Noise. Tension between staff and parents. Children’s immediate needs. Too much work and paperwork. Too many children per caregiver. Not enough time for training. No time or place for a quiet break during the day.

Stressful feelings may also come from having limited career advancement opportunities, not understanding all the aspects of being a caregiver, not getting along with--or having time to get along with--co-workers, and lack of clear direction from the supervisors.

Here are some suggestions to reduce stress in your childcare program. If you are a supervisor, these are for you. If you’re a caregiver, you may want to pass them along to your supervisor.

Provide clear, written policies and procedures on issues such as job descriptions and responsibilities, discipline, or dealing with parents.

Make sure staff are familiar with and understand these policies and procedures by providing training and regular review and discussion.

Be available to staff when they need you. Encourage caregivers to let you know their needs.

- Provide training and resources that make their jobs easier.
- Review jobs periodically to make sure the work load and expectations are reasonable.
- Watch caregivers as they work and provide positive feedback as well as constructive suggestions.
- Encourage problem solving within the staff.
- Encourage good working relationships not only by handling problems, but also by offering opportunities for staff time together, perhaps for a coffee break or before school breakfast once every few months.
- Encourage good health habits--and model them, too! Exercise, healthy eating, hand washing, and simple things such as flu shots will help everyone stay healthy.

Healthy CHILDCare Magazine: “Are You Getting Enough ZZZZZs?”

Marilyn Massey-Stokes, EdD, CHES, Associate Professor, Texas Tech University

In your fast-paced lives, it is essential to get a good night's sleep on a regular basis. Your health and quality of life depend on it! Although the amount of sleep each person needs varies, the average range is 7-8 hours a night. Yet for millions of Americans, getting a good night's sleep is an elusive goal.

According to the second annual Better Sleep Council Stress Survey (May 2003), 66 percent of Americans were losing sleep due to stress. The number one source of stress reported by survey respondents was family issues. Other causes of stress may include job-related concerns and financial matters. Generally speaking, losing sleep due to stress one or two nights a week will not have a significant effect on a person's ability to perform. However, lack of sleep three or four days in a row will hurt impact daily activities.

Common Sleep Problems

Insomnia is the most common sleep problem, but what exactly is it? Insomnia can include any of the following characteristics: taking a long time to fall asleep (more than 30-45 minutes); waking up too many times during the night; waking up early and being unable to go back to sleep; or waking up feeling tired. Insomnia usually is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. Insomnia can be linked with other sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea.

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening, sleep disorder with momentary interruptions in breathing during sleep. An estimated 18 million Americans suffer from sleep apnea. Daytime sleepiness and loud snoring at night are indicators that a person may have sleep apnea. A physician specializing in sleep disorders can make a diagnosis and recommend treatment, which ranges from learning to sleep in the correct position to using devices that help keep airways open, taking medication, and having surgery. Sleep apnea is often associated with people who are overweight.

If you are overweight or obese you may have trouble sleeping. Additionally, sleep problems can contribute to obesity by impairing the body's metabolism and disrupting hormone levels. Poor sleep and sleep deprivation also may increase appetite, which can lead to a vicious cycle of overeating.

Negative Effects of Sleep Loss

Lack of sleep can have a negative impact on health and quality of life in various ways. For example, headaches, eye strain, irritable bowels, increased irritability and stress, increased mistakes, and difficulty concentrating are associated with lack of sleep. Some of the serious consequences that can result from lack of sleep include risk of depressive disorders, impaired breathing, and heart disease. In addition, daytime sleepiness resulting from sleep deprivation is linked to memory deficits, impaired social and occupational functioning, and vehicle crashes.

Tips for Sleeping

If lack of sleep is diminishing your quality of life, consider these tips for improving the quality and quantity of your sleep:

- Make sleep a priority, even if it means leaving some tasks until the next day.
- Develop a regular routine. Doing the same things each night before bedtime signals your brain and body to settle down for sleep.
- Keep your biological clock in check by going to bed and waking up close to the same time each day--even on weekends.
- Maintain a restful bedroom environment. Sleep on a comfortable, supportive mattress and foundation. In addition, sleep in a cool, well-ventilated, dark room that is free from distracting noises. If light is a problem, consider wearing a lightweight sleep mask. A fan or sound machine can block out any unwanted noise.
- Exercise regularly. Regular exercise can help relieve tension and stress. Avoid exercising within 2-3 hours of bedtime, however. The stimulation of the exercise may cause you to have trouble falling asleep.
- Try to expose yourself to natural light in the afternoon each day.
- Reduce your intake of stimulants. Caffeine and certain medications can make it difficult for you to fall asleep.
- Do not smoke. Smokers take longer to fall asleep and wake up more often during the night. In addition, nicotine is a stimulant.
- Limit or avoid consumption of alcohol. Drinking alcohol shortly before bedtime tends to interrupt and fragment sleep.
- Worry less. Stress and anxiety tend to wreak havoc on sleep. Find ways to effectively manage stress, and try mental relaxation techniques to alleviate your worries as you are trying to fall asleep.

Healthy CHILDCare Magazine: Laughter and Play Keep the Doctor Away

You probably have heard the old saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." The same adage applies to laughter and play!

As a caregiver, you know the importance of laughter and play for children; but as an adult, you may forget that what laughter and play do for your own well-being. As Norman Cousins once said, "Laughter is inner jogging."

It is just as important to get your "inner" exercise as it is to get aerobic exercise for your body. Laughter and play relieve stress. Laughter causes you to look younger--it takes more wrinkles in your face to make a frown than when you are laughing. Laughter is an antidote for a multitude of ills, and research has shown that laughter is a natural painkiller!

"A sense of humor is good for you. Have you ever heard of a laughing hyena with heart burn?" - Bob Hope

Your daily routine should include time for laughter and play. Think about the last time you laughed out loud. What were you doing? Whom were you laughing with? What memories do you have from childhood that make you laugh?

Studies have shown that just putting on a smile or "faking it" can actually improve your mood. It is all about attitude. You can tell yourself a "good time" story or a "bad time" story, and this can make all the difference in your attitude toward life and your health.

"Play is our brain's favorite way of learning." - Diane Ackerman

Health and fitness professionals are interested in physical fitness levels. But what about play fitness levels? And Play Quotient (PQ) is just as important as Intelligence Quotient (IQ). Play is a wonderful stress reliever.

You may sometimes wish you could return to the whimsical days of childhood when you could play all day just like the children in your care. While you cannot play all day, you do have some choices and you can integrate play with your adult obligations. Play can become a part of your daily life in addition to work, school, family and other responsibilities.

For example, when you play with a child, you are transported into his or her magical world of make believe; and when you play a game or sing a song, you can retain information better because you are more relaxed and free from care.

Benefits of Laughter

Medical research shows that laughter can be helpful in healing and in preventing stress. Some studies show that laughter:

- Increases in the number and activity level of natural killer cells that attack viral infected cells and some types of cancer and tumor cells.
- Increase activated T cells (T lymphocytes) and gamma interferon which help the immune system.
- Increases the antibody IgA (immunoglobulin A) which fights upper respiratory tract infections.

Laughter also decreases blood pressure as well as stress hormones that constrict blood vessels and suppress immune activity. And if you exercise, laughter can help because it is aerobic, providing a workout for the diaphragm and increasing the body's ability to use oxygen. Do you want to increase brain function? Then laugh!

"The world is your playground. Why aren't you playing?" – Ellie Katz

Add Fun to Your Life

There are many ways to bring more laughter and play into daily life.

- Break out in a song or dance, even if you do not have rhythm! There is nothing better than singing or dancing to bring on laughter and play.
- For movie buffs, watch a comedy.
- Keep a list of funny quotes near by. When you feel down, read several until you start laughing.
- Read your favorite comics in the daily newspaper or on the Internet.
- Tell yourself a "good time" story. Bring up pleasant memories of laughter and play from your past--take an instant "vacation" in your mind.
- Do something spontaneous and silly with someone you love.
- Watch how good your children are at laughter and play... and emulate them!

So, after playing with the children in your care during the day, remember to include laughter and play for yourself--it can be better than that apple a day for your health!

Healthy CHILDCare Magazine: Feeling Blue?

Diona Reeves

Occasionally feeling sad or down in the dumps is a normal part of day-to-day life. But feeling depressed for extended periods of time can indicate something more serious. Depression has become such a common complaint that the Journal of the American Medical Association estimates it costs employers upwards of \$44 billion per year in lost productivity.

Many workers miss work because of depression-related illnesses that do not respond to traditional treatment, such as headaches, fatigue, and general malaise. Depression affects a person's health both physically and emotionally. It leaves individuals more vulnerable to the effects of stress, which is linked to diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

It also has a direct effect on emotional well-being, including effectiveness at work, satisfaction levels, and dedication to the tasks at hand. When you are plagued by depression, not only do you not feel like doing much, you are often unable to complete your normal duties. Depression can diminish your quality of life; some people describe it as a "dark curtain" or "cloud" over their life.

Warning Signs

Because depression is so common, it is important to be aware of the warning signs. Depression can take many forms, but the National Institute of Mental Health identifies the following symptoms as the most common indicators of depression.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- Restlessness and irritability.
- Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed.

Simply experiencing one or two of these symptoms does not mean you are depressed. The key to diagnosing depression is the time involved. If symptoms last for more than two weeks at a time, then it is likely that depression is the cause.

Talk to your doctor or another health professional if you are feeling depressed. This is particularly important when life events make you more likely to suffer from depression--for instance a death in the family, the loss of a job, or the birth of a baby (which can trigger a type of depression in late pregnancy or after the baby's birth.)

Often your blues may be temporary, or dysthymia, which is a mild form of depression. Although mild, dysthymia still affects people in significant ways, particularly where work is concerned.

Managing Mild Depression in Childcare

Of all the nasty effects depression can have on an individual, perhaps the worst for a childcare provider is the sense of lethargy. Lack of motivation or interest in events around you can affect the quality of care you provide to children. This is a particular challenge for individual family childcare providers who may not have additional staff to rely on. The following suggestions for handling depression in childcare can be implemented regardless of the type of facility you work in.

Take A Break

Whenever possible, allow yourself 5-10 minutes of solitude to relax, meditate, or gather your thoughts. Although this might not seem useful at first, the long-term effects can be substantial. Simply taking several deep breaths throughout the day also can be effective, especially if you do not have other staff to help you out. If possible, step outside and breathe fresh air. Like deep breathing, fresh air helps to restore oxygen levels in your body, giving you more energy and promoting mental alertness. And try to get plenty of sleep each night.

Get Active

Physical movement releases adrenaline into your bloodstream and promotes the production of serotonin in the brain (a chemical which many suspect plays a role in mood stabilization). Go outside as the children in your care also will benefit from outdoor exposure and might be more cooperative after releasing some energy of their own, something that will serve you well when nap time rolls around!

Diet

Certain foods and caffeinated drinks are known to affect mood levels and may cause irritability. Consider avoiding these items for a few weeks to see if doing so help stabilize your mood. A well-balanced diet is essential in combating stress or depression.

Be Realistic

Give yourself time to feel better. To prevent yourself from being overwhelmed, the National Institute of Mental Health recommends breaking large tasks into small ones, setting some initial priorities, and doing what you can as you are able.

If exercise, meditation, a strong support system, and dietary changes do not alleviate your depressive symptoms, professional help may be in order. In some cases, medications may be recommended. Be sure to tell your doctor that you are a child caregiver and your profession requires you to be fully alert, energetic, and interactive. Some antidepressants may make you drowsy or irritable. Your doctor should be able to help you find a medication or dosage that meets your needs without affecting your work.