

Helping Children Cope with Stress

By Julia Luckenbill, Infant/Toddler Program Coordinator

We often think of childhood as an idyllic, stress-free time of life. There are, after all, no bills to pay, no appointments to schedule and no confrontations with the boss. Unfortunately, the reality of children's lives is that stressful things still happen: families move, parents lose jobs, pets die, school years end and new classes start, and there are new friendships to establish. Not only do children experience stress, but they have less past experience to draw on as they attempt to work through the things life throws their way. Because children will encounter stressful events it is the responsibility of the child's caregivers to learn about the process by which children face stress and stressors, and then help children assemble an internal toolkit for coping which reflects each child's age and needs. This toolkit should contain strategies for emotionally navigating a variety of life events.

Any form of loss or change can lead to childhood stress. A childhood loss can be as large as the death of a grandparent, or as seemingly insignificant as the outgrowing of a favorite shirt. When children experience loss and change, they often grieve, even if the change will ultimately be positive. Caregivers who are aware of the phases of grief can alleviate some stress during this time simply by reflecting the feelings of the children at each stage and listening sympathetically. The Five Stages of Grief, as detailed by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, begin with *shock and denial*: the shirt isn't too small... Grandpa isn't really gone. Grieving is a protective reflex. After the protective period during when the child begins to become aware of the loss, comes *anger*. The shirt can't be too small! How dare Grandpa leave us! In this phase the child will often lash out at loved ones who, children believe, "will still love me after I've been mad." Younger

children who are in the phase of "magical thinking" often are angry at something or someone who, they imagine, has caused the loss, even if this attribution of responsibility is false. Sometimes they think that they caused the loss and are angry at themselves. This is because young children, as "magical thinkers," consider themselves capable of causing events just by thinking about them. *"I didn't want Grandpa to tuck me in and I said, 'Go away!'" and now he won't ever come back! I did that. I'm bad."*

After anger, children enter the phase of *bargaining*. In this phase children make small steps toward coping with the change: *"Can I keep the shirt and just wear it at home?"* or *"Could I just see Grandpa one more time and then he's gone?"* They are still not comfortable with the change, but are willing to see it as existent. Once aware that the loss is final, and not negotiable, they reach the phase of *depression*; there was a loss and it is sad. Finally after this period of sadness, the child reaches *acceptance* of the loss, aware that the loss was sad but that life goes on.

How caregivers talk about change can affect how children accept and process change and loss. First, it is important to think about the child's own response to the loss or change as reflected in the above stages. Is the child ready to think about the change? Next, identify for or with the child the emotions involved. *"You look angry/worried/sad."* Then, identify the issue at hand, *"I wonder if you are thinking about the move to the new house?"* *"I wonder if mommy flying on the airplane to the new house is hard for you?"* *"I wonder if we have been so busy moving that we haven't had time to play?"* You can offer your own feelings about the stressor: *"I'm feeling worried about moving, too."* *"I'm sad to leave my*

friends.” *“I miss having time to play with you.”* Be sure to use the real words that relate to the loss, especially the word “died.” Words like, “put to sleep, is sleeping under the ground, lost, gone away, passed away” can lead children who are in the phase of magical thought to imagine that they too will die when they sleep, get lost, etc. They may be frightened by the concept of a dead grandparent sleeping and trapped under the ground.

Sometimes children are not ready to talk about the issue directly. If this is the case, but the child appears to need to talk, making the story less direct is a way to begin the conversation. Instead of saying, “you might feel angry,” you can say, *“some kids feel angry when they have to say goodbye.”* You might read a book in which the main character feels angry. You might act out a puppet show about an angry puppet child or favorite stuffed animal that feels angry. This less pointed approach to global emotions can be helpful if the child is ashamed or the topic is too sensitive to broach.

Next, you can make a plan with the child so that things are easier. This is where you pull out your tool-bag of adult coping skills. Some children respond well to visual images and preparation for what to do about the change (or, if you are using an indirect approach, what the puppet/some other child will do about the change). Offering photos of what is going or gone and preparing them for what will happen next is one way to help children consider and talk about change. There are many excellent children’s books that suggest child-centered ways to cope with a broad range of stressors: absent or divorcing parents, parents with new jobs, death, loss of teeth, medical appointments, the move to a new bed, new favorite boots, toilet learning, loss of a favorite lovey, separation from parents for school, new teachers...the list goes on.

Once you have broached the topic, the

child may begin to talk. If not, the child may not be ready yet because he or she is still in denial, too angry to hear you yet, or too intent on bargaining to hear you. Patience is essential. With time, the child will be ready.

What do you do next when the child begins to ask questions? Answer them with honesty, using accurate language, but with awareness of the child's age. If the child is an infant, simply looking at pictures and hearing stories about the dead person or pet or upcoming changes may be enough. Caregivers who are sensitive to children’s fears about separation from parents can make sure to consider these fears in the messages sent about the change or stressor: *“Mommy will always come back. Mommy went on the airplane to see the new house. Let’s look at a picture of Mommy while we wait. We can call Mommy on the phone.”* If the child is a toddler, be aware that in addition to separation, children fear loss of independence and mobility. Remember to consider magical thinking: they believe that they are the cause of everything, and will invent imaginary “what-ifs,” such as the possibility that their whole bodies could go down the drain with the bathwater if they do not understand that this is physically impossible. Toddlers and early preschoolers need you to listen carefully to hear what misinformation they have gleaned, and they need facts about the events that will happen or have happened, phrased in simple language. *“You had an accident. You fell down and hurt your leg. The doctor will help you keep the leg safe by wrapping it up. Your leg will still be there under the wrapping. It may be harder to walk for a while but you will walk again.”* They need explanations about the injuries they observe in others as well: *“Mommy was cooking and she cut her finger. Now she has a big Band-Aid to keep it clean. Soon it will get better.”* Without these explanations (and the healing power of the Band-Aid) toddlers and preschoolers may well imagine that the cut will bleed forever. Band-Aids and explanations are comforting!

Older preschoolers need control of the events in their lives, they view negative changes as punishments, and they fear changes to their bodies. Puppetry is an excellent way for children to be “in charge” of the changes, express their ideas, and act out the things that are happening to them to consider solutions or ways to cope. Older preschoolers also respond very well to books about children like them, and to dress-up costumes and props which they can use to reenact their experiences.

As you can see, your response to children’s stress will depend on the child. As with the language you use, the tools to help children cope depend on the age of the child and the phase of grieving about the change that the child has entered.

Infants and toddlers need you to minimize separations and to use photography and comfort items. They need you to provide short explanations about what will happen, what changes to expect, and where their parents will be. Exposing the child to the change gradually (visiting the new home, touching a real stethoscope, staying with the infant on the first day of childcare) provides infants time to get used to changes. Reading age appropriate books and using rituals can answer unspoken questions, as long as adults screen out books with scary images which reflect things that will not happen to the child.

Preschoolers benefit from acting out stressful events through dramatic play. Providing real props that address the child’s fears, books about emotions and events, and puppets or dolls can provoke interactions during which children discuss their feelings about stressors and brainstorm with you about what to do. Making time to be with the child and interact in this type of relaxed play is key – even if your own stressors limit your time. If you are not listening, you cannot hear their fears. You can also set up special one-on-one time with projects where preschoolers can

be successful and helpful at a task. Do not lie to children about changes – they hear you talk with other adults and pick up bits and pieces of the real story, creating their own, often frightening, story of what is happening.

Although we cannot protect children from the world or guarantee them a stress-free idyllic childhood, our actions as informed caregivers can support resiliency and growth through experience. Knowing that preparation, practice and planning are key to coping will help you design your unique response to your own child and the stressors in his or her life. You may even find that the process of talking with your child about the things that worry him or her can also help you to process the experience. If you find yourself at a loss for what to do, please consult with the CCFS staff. We can partner with you to provide support and resources as you navigate your stressful time.

References/resources available upon request