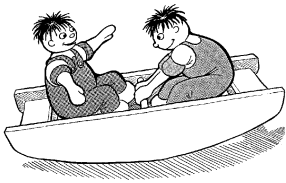


# Guiding Behavior: Reducing Children's Stress



Quality early childhood environments offer attractive play materials, sturdy play equipment, and fun and meaningful activities with consideration for each child's abilities and interests. Quality environments also actively address children's emotional needs. In fact, deliberate effort is made to implement early childhood practices that reduce stress, competition, and frustration for children. Reducing frequent stress, competition, and frustration often results in preventing children's engagement in challenging behavior.

Unnecessarily stressful situations may arise when children compete for scarce resources such as novel play materials or the opportunity to play in a favorite play area or center. Anxiety and frustration may occur when children have limited time to complete an activity or when play periods are too short and they are unable to engage in deeply focused, sustained play. Children may feel stressed or end up roaming from area to area when they cannot find a space to play that has room for them and their two best buddies.

Children relax and begin engaging in self-initiated turn-taking when they have the opportunity to engage in a favorite pastime over and over—across several days or even weeks, depending on interest. Repetition is an important learning strategy for young children; it reduces competition and offers security for children knowing that their play interests and needs will be met. You can take steps to prevent challenging behavior and reduce stress for the children in your program by using the following practices: a) effectively plan for play and b) individualize the play environment.

## A) EFFECTIVELY PLAN FOR PLAY

- Schedule long, uninterrupted play times daily.
- Plan transition routines that limit competition and help children move calmly to their selected play area.
- Make popular, high interest materials available daily and over time.
- As interest in a play area begins to fade, add new elements to broaden the scope and increase the complexity of children's play.
- Rotate materials periodically to promote new skills and maintain children's interest.
- Introduce changes in the play environment gradually rather than all at once.
- Anticipate high interest in new play areas or materials by introducing multiples (three bowling sets rather than just one) or several similar activities at the same time.
- When a child is effectively exploring a range of play activities across a day and a week, let the duration of play in a center be guided primarily by the child's interest (as opposed to bells and timers).
- If a child has to wait to enter a play area, offer a similar type of play activity while he or she waits.

## B) INDIVIDUALIZE THE PLAY ENVIRONMENT

- Offer materials related to each child's special interest(s) in each play area.
- Ensure that each child can find a balance of challenge and success in materials/activities in each play area.

When you value play as essential to children's growth and development, you understand their drive to play with their friends, engage with play materials, and create play scenarios that are meaningful in their young lives. When your play environment fosters a positive emotional climate, you make healthy, productive interactions more likely.

## Try It Out

A number of early childhood programs require that children “reserve” a spot in the area or center where they want to play by posting a name tag. While this practice may help limit the number of children in the play area, this commonly used strategy may also create stress in children. To assess the situation in your program:

- Watch to see whether children hurry (or even run) to put their name tag up, pushing other children aside.
- Look for instances when children forget to move their name tag to a new center, dash across the room to retrieve it, and return to find someone else has taken their play space.
- Be alert to children who are tempted to remove another child’s name tag so they can get into a center—to be with a best friend, for example—effectively pushing someone else out.
- Observe for children waiting outside a play area, unengaged for extended periods of time, because the name tag board is full for that area.

If you found any of the above problems are occurring in your program, you will want to switch to other less stressful options. While name tags may help children with name recognition, many other methods (labeling cubbies and signing art work themselves) are equally, if not more, effective.

## A Child Care Provider’s Question

**QUESTION:** What I am supposed to do if I stop using timers to get children to move from their favorite learning center to another center? They’ll never move, and that will keep other children from having their turn.

**ANSWER:** When children are satisfied and unworried about being able to play at their own pace, most will voluntarily move on to other activities. They relax because they know for sure that they will have regular opportunities to return if they want them. If you could just throw away the bells and timers (or lights flashing or whatever you use to tell children to stop what they are doing and move on), you would change the nature of your program in just two weeks.

When children have frequent and uninterrupted chances to play, they stop hoarding play materials and play spaces. They eventually become eager to share space and materials with others because they are no longer concerned about getting their turn. They are less anxious because they have been provided with many turns, and they know for sure there will be more in the future.

The depth and complexity of play increases as children are given enough time and materials to expand their play

themes and work on child-initiated projects. They build positive relationships with other children because competition for space and play materials has been reduced or eliminated.

Shifting to this approach takes initial commitment, flexibility in scheduling, and enough time for you and the children to get used to this new way of doing things. The benefits of this approach are huge, especially when it includes children’s being able to “save” a play theme or block building for later. Teachers and caregivers who switch from timed play to extended play never seem to want to return to using a timer again!

