

# Child Care plus+

## + 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 in 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. + CC+

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## + IN FOCUS

When a child is meaningfully engaged in the play activities you provide, challenging behavior is minimized and the result is the child's growth and learning. You support a child's meaningful engagement in play when you:

- Develop a daily schedule that matches the pace of each child in the group and provides plenty of time for play.
- Let the child engage in an activity until he or she is ready for something new. Avoid disrupting play by using timers or requiring children to "move on."
- Allow the child to return to an unfinished activity later. This reassures children, encourages deep exploration, and the child will be able to complete something to his or her satisfaction and learning.
- Reproduce the play elements that are most satisfying to the child in several play areas.
- Allow children to explore materials, work at their own pace, and spend as much time as they want in teacher-directed activities. Avoid either rushing children to finish or making them wait until everyone else has finished. Arrange a transition area children can move to at their own pace *whenever* they finish.

Many children engage in challenging behavior because they are stressed by expectations to finish or leave activities according to someone else's time table. You can change that by allowing plenty of time to finish playing either now or later on. + CC+

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## + 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 (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. + CC+

## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

It is likely that you are very conscious of what parents see and hear when they visit your program. Are you equally as aware of what they may "feel"? Do you pay attention to the kind of tone being set by the interactions among teachers/caregivers and the children? What kind of feeling does your program convey to people who enter or spend time there? What do parents and visitors say about being in your program? Do they make comments about how the experience made them feel? Do they want to stay or come back again?

When young children are able to play and explore at their own pace, the positive climate in the program can be felt by everyone. Visitors may comment that there is something different about the program, but they just can't describe what it is. They may even mention that they do not feel the same thing in other early childhood programs they have visited. It's almost like there's something in the air; it is somewhat difficult to describe with words.

What they are feeling is the calm, peaceful atmosphere that naturally exists when children are meaningfully engaged with materials and unworried about having enough play time and toys to meet their needs. In programs where children are rushed and anxious about getting enough materials or time to play, the feeling is very different; even people who are just visiting can feel the anxiety in the air. When your program is frequently the most peaceful spot in this sometimes chaotic world, everyone—parents, teachers/caregivers, visitors, and children—feel good about being there. + CC+

## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Here are five simple strategies you can use to reduce children's stress and promote learning in your program.

○ **Redesign play areas and rotate materials gradually.** Stress and competition sometimes arise from novelty and change. Add new items a few at a time or make modest changes over a few days or weeks rather than all at once. For example, put an assortment of envelopes in the writing area; wait a few days to add "postage stamp" stickers. Wait a week to add a mailbox. Add large manila envelopes some time after that. Each new item adds interest and sustains meaningful play. Engage the children in the process by asking *what do you know about the post office? What else do we need for our post office?*

○ **Set up several related popular or new activities at the same time.** If a new center or activity is likely to draw a lot of interest, and therefore competition for play materials, provide several similar opportunities. For example, set up the workbench (space for 2 children), but also bring in a tree stump, hammers, nails (space for 3 children), and old ceiling tiles, small hammers and tacks at a table (space for 4 children). The additional activities can be phased out as the novelty of hammering at the workbench wears off, and the workbench can adequately support the children who continue to enjoy the activity.

○ **Work with children to suggest the number of players in an area.** As you create a play area, carefully consider the number of children likely to be playing there at one time. Add materials and create the space to reduce stressful situations that arise from too few play materials or crowding. When you introduce the play area, engage the children in making a decision about how many the play area will accommodate. For example, children can count safety goggles and identify how many can safely play at the workbench.

However, in many play areas, this suggested number can be more flexible. For example, when five children are playing productively in an area you developed with four children in mind, there is no reason to disrupt the play—and create a stressful situation—by directing one child to find another activity. If you decide to post the *recommended* number in the play area (a sign with the numeral 4 and four dots), remain flexible so children or adults can negotiate the number (either up or down), as needed. Check in frequently with children to see how play is going; problem-solve with them by saying, *we*

*thought the house would be just right for three children, but it looks like four of you are playing well together.*

*Do you think we should change our sign to four?*

This process helps children shift from hard, fast numbers—which can potentially exclude children—to the quality of their play and their ability to work things out together to sustain play.

○ **Arrange for children to move to the next activity in small clusters rather than all at once or one child at a time.** When children move from

a whole group event, such as circle time, to an open choice play time, such as learning centers, it makes sense and reduces waiting time to send children off in groups of two or three. For example, you can announce "if you have shoes that tie, please go choose your first center," or "if your name starts with a B, you may go now." Calling on children one by one may cause stress as they see others choosing the center where they were hoping to play. On the other hand, letting children go all at once may create competition, chaos, and frustration, as children rush to get to a favorite place before someone else gets there.

○ **When waiting for a turn is unavoidable, support children.** When a child must wait for an opportunity to play at a particular center or have a turn with an activity, begin by empathizing; assure the child that he or she will get an opportunity to play. You might talk about a recent time when a child who waited got a turn, "I remember yesterday when you were playing in the house. Ben wanted to play, too, but the house was full. Ben played in the blocks while he waited, and when there was room in the house, you told him, so he could come play." Help the child find a similar play activity while waiting. For example, a child waiting for the computer may choose calculators or adding machines.

You can also create simple processes to help children understand that they will get a turn—even when it might be the next day. For example, make sure you call on the child who was waiting yesterday to be in the first group that selects learning centers today. You can also occasionally use a sign-in sheet so when a child finishes an activity, she can notify the next child on the list to have a turn. Subtle strategies will be the most effective for helping children get their needs met rather than building complex waiting strategies that focus children's attention on the "waiting." +

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## + 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/caregivers who switch from timed play to extended play never seem to want to return to using a timer again! + CC+

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

The following online resources may be helpful to you in your effort to reduce stress in your program:

A) *Guidelines for Decisions about Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (NAEYC)

[www.naeyc.org/about/positions/dap4.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/dap4.asp)

B) *Stress Management for Carers of Young Children* (Childcare and Children's Health Newsletter)

[www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ecconnections/CCH\\_Vol7\\_No6\\_December2004.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ecconnections/CCH_Vol7_No6_December2004.pdf)

C) *Discipline Tips and Tidbits: Ten "To Do's" for Discipline* (Becky Bailey)

[www.beckybailey.com/disciptip.cfm?identifier=2](http://www.beckybailey.com/disciptip.cfm?identifier=2) +

*CHILD CARE plus* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$10 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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