**Strategies That Work With Stressed-Out Children**

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Description: Dig deeper into the emotional, spiritual, mental, and even physiological side effects kids can experience due to stress. Grapple with strategies to reduce kids’ stress with improvements to your classroom environment and activities.

Objectives for this session

* Develop a better understanding of what stresses children of divorce.
* Learn what stress does to the body and mind in children especially children of divorce / cohabiting.
* Be exposed to tips and tools that help leaders lessen the stress.
* Realize that children’s behavior becomes their voice and learn how to listen to their behaviors in order to help the child.
* Become equipped with brain research that is successful with stressed children.

**I. One of the most stressful events today is divorce.**

* Two parents that were one unit – are now two parents going separate ways.
* Children are left standing in the middle wondering where they belong.
* Keep in mind it’s all about the ***child’s perception*** of what has happened. Children will look at things differently than the adult. Sometimes these perceptions are incorrect, but to a child, it’s how he or she perceives things to be.
* Divorce affects many areas of a child’s life and causes undue stress.   
  1. Saying “hello” to one parent means saying “goodbye” to the other.  
  2. Not knowing where the other parent is  
  3. Not knowing where they will spend the holidays  
  4. How to handle birthdays  
  5. How to handle new relationships  
  6. How to handle losing friends, pets, etc.

**II. What stress does to children**

* Stress is the body’s way of reacting to challenging or frightening events.
* Stressors affect children physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.
* Stress can affect a child’s health and or behavior.
* Stress interrupts the sleep process.
* Stress scrambles the learning circuits in a child’s brain

**III. What stress does to the body and brain**

* Response to a perceived threat is for the body to channel resources for strength

and speed.

* The *stress response* is known as the *fight* or *flight* response in the brain.
* Brain dulls sense of pain.
* Brain thinks safety.
* Blood vessels open wider to allow more blood flow to large muscle groups.
* Lungs take in more oxygen.
* Digestion halts allowing the body to dedicate energy to the muscles.
* Chronic stress can affect a child’s behavior and learning.

1. Chronic stress releases cortisol in the brain.
2. Over time cortisol can kill brain cells.
3. Increases depression, anger and fatigue.

* Signs of poorly managed stress  
  Inability to concentrate  
  Poor memory  
  Low level of creativity  
  Flushed face  
  Cold hands  
  Rapid shallow breathing  
  Empathy – everything is about you  
  No impulse control – you react  
  Irritability  
  Overindulging  
  Other

**IV.** **Ways to help stressed children**

* Music – harmonies can rewire the brain creating connections between different regions.
* Movement – get stressed kids moving the spine and cross lateral and midline activities will be demonstrated also.
* Transitions – plan for transitions such as entering the room.
* Breathing from the diaphragm
* Other stress reducers

1. Don’t rush stressed kids.
2. Provide copious amounts of water. Stress dehydrates us and dehydrated brains can’t think.
3. No surprises – keep a consistent and posted schedule in view at all times.
4. Tell the children what you want them to do, not what you don’t want them to do.
5. Create church family where kids connect with each other and with you.

* Stress is painful. Stress hurts. Kids complain of bodily pains.

**V. Child’s behavior becomes their voice**

* Many children who misbehave are actually seeking external regulation or management. In other words they don’t know how to internally regulate themselves so they seek outside regulation.
* Children’s behavior becomes their voice when they

1. Don’t feel safe
2. Don’t feel loved
3. Are confused
4. When they don’t know what is happening next

* Many kids, when they act out or misbehave, are doing the best they can to survive in the stressful moment.

**VI. Equipping volunteers to work with stressed children**

* Empathy – use the role of empathy in getting kids attention. Patience, not punishment, turns angry students into happy kids.   
    
  Empathy is a heart understanding. It’s feeling what they feel. It’s feeling the same emotion. Empathy means providing them comfort. They need you to comfort them. Sometimes we forget to comfort the children.
* Mirror neurons – activate the mirror neurons in the brain to change a child’s mood. Mirror neurons allow what is happening in your brain to be projected onto other people. When you smile, it can activate the mirror neurons in another person’s brain and they will mirror your expression.   
    
  Just like a child catches a cold, kids can catch your mood.
* Listen with your eyes.
* Some kids brains are wired for self-preservation.
* Children, who have experienced a crisis or family trauma such as a divorce, are intuitive.
* Does every infraction need to be addressed? Sometimes a look, nod of the head or a hand signal will work effectively.
* Prepare yourself first by having your mind free and clear and ready to listen. These kids have learned to read body language; they will look at your face, your eyes to see if they have your attention. They also will be able to tell if your mind is some other place. If your mind is on something other than that very moment, they will turn you off. You will loose them probably for the rest of that session.

**VII. Closure**

* Every child is different. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to ministering to the child who is under stress.
* What this is all about -- ministering!
* In the Bible  
  1. Matthew 8:16 where He healed the demon possessed, the Bible says He did it with a word.   
    
  2. In Matthew 9:6 when the lame man couldn’t walk, He told the man to get up, take his mat and walk.  
    
  I3. Mark 8:22-23 Jesus spit on the blind man’s eyes and put His hands on the man to heal his blindness.
* Learn to see the humor and laugh with the children. Laughter reduces stress.   
    
  Proverbs 15:15 *The cheerful heart has a continual feast.*

Mark 4:1 “*He went back to teaching by the sea. A crowd built up to such a great size that he had to get into an offshore boat, using the boat as a pulpit as the people pushed to the water’s edge.*” (Message)

Resources

<http://divorceministry4kids.com/2012/fear-and-the-brain-in-children-of-divorce/> Fear and the Brain in Children of Divorce

<http://divorceministry4kids.com/2012/stress-and-the-brain-in-children-of-divorce/> Stress and the Brain in Children of Divorce

[www.ConsciousDiscipline.com](http://www.ConsciousDiscipline.com) Dr. Becky Bailey, *Conscious Discipline* (Loving Guidance, Inc.)

<http://www.childtrauma.org/> Bruce Perry, several articles and books on trauma

<http://braing.org> Kathy Nunley, *A Student’s Brain: The Parent/Teacher Manual (Morris Publishing)*

<http://pamschiller.com> Pam Shciller, *Start Smart* (Gryphon House)

<http://tinyrul.com/6pmvxtr> Joseph Ledoux, “Searching the Brain for the Roots of Fear” an article in Online Commentary from the Times

<http://divorceministry4kids.com/2012/practical-ways-to-help-children-of-divorce-deal-with-stress/> Practical Ways to Help Children of Divorce Deal with Stress

([www.edutopia.org/neuroscience-brain-based-learning-emotional-safety](http://www.edutopia.org/neuroscience-brain-based-learning-emotional-safety) “To Enable Learning Put (Emotional) Safety First”, Judy Willis

<http://www.edutopia.org/> “Create a Safe Climate for Learning” Tip #1 Six Tips for Brain-Based Learning