

Supporting Children/Youth During the Holidays in Times of Stress

The Holidays are here! The Holidays are here! For many of us, this time of the year is an exciting and joyful period. Full of food, presents, family traditions, and spending time with loved ones. But for families and communities in stressful situations, the holidays can be particularly challenging, evoking anxiety, feelings of loss, disappointment, and grief. Added to the usual holiday stress, some children/youth may face painful memories, family conflict, difficult family dynamics, or at the worst, violence. The season may become one of sadness and grief, often lasting well after the New Year.

Educators and families need to be especially alert to the signs of stress in children/youth during this season. Signs of stress vary by developmental stages, but common signs include:

- Sleeping too much or too little
- Complaining or exhibiting physical symptoms - head/stomachaches, rash or asthma flare ups
- Regression in behaviors or habits - bed wetting, thumb sucking, nail-biting, etc.
- Strong emotions or emotional swings – crying or laughing, being agitated or edgy, worrying, lack of energy
- Anti-social behavior (withdrawal/isolation, aggression), or excessive attachment (clingy/needy) in younger children
- Signs of addictive behavior such as overeating, use of alcohol or other drugs¹

Care is needed to identify and help both children/youth and adults deal with stress. Positive child/adult relationships can become deeper when adults effectively help children/youth respond to their stress. School leaders should also be on the look-out for signs for stress in staff, and support educators' efforts through recognition and appreciation.

Tips for Preparing Educators to Work with Students Who are Stressed

- Train educators to recognize signs of stress in students and how to respond (when to talk, act, or refer).
- Encourage educators to report any concerns of child/youth stress, so appropriate staff can provide additional support to the students.
- Remind educators that children/youth often regress at times of stress. Encourage educators to celebrate every little success and not take personal responsibility for regression.
- Encourage educators to monitor their own stress levels and find positive ways of dealing with stress (exercise, talk, readjust expectations, etc.).
- Encourage educators to show active interest when interacting with students and their families. Being treated with respect and concern goes a long way in building relationships.

Tips for Working with Children/Youth who May be Stressed

- Help children/youth learn to recognize when they are becoming stressed and to identify personal strategies for responding to stress (exercise/ active play, talking, writing or drawing, etc.).
- Acknowledge the children/youth's experience of stress and help him/her realize stress is a normal part of life.
- Encourage children/youth to ask for help from trusted adults (family, staff, other trusted adult) when feeling overly stressed. Make sure staff and families are aware of where to refer children/youth having trouble coping with stress.

¹ Adapted from: <http://www.preparerespondrecover.com/childrensneeds/>, http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/stress.html, and <http://www.webmd.com/parenting/signs-of-teen-stress>

- Help children/youth to believe in and recognize their ability to handle the situation in a positive way. Recognize and praise children/youth when they use positive strategies, regardless of the outcome.

Tips for Focused Adult Interactions with Students During the Holiday Season

- Schedule activities that include both community service opportunities, to focus children/youth on helping others rather than focus on themselves; and fun recreational activities to build relationships and, if necessary, re-focus their attention.
- Encourage journaling as a way to focus on the future.
- Become familiar with ways to refer to mental health professionals those children/youth who are having trouble coping with stress.
- Be sure to recognize the dates of various cultural holidays (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Diwali, Ramadan, etc.). This demonstrates cultural competence and helps children/youth focus on learning about others rather than concentrating on themselves.

Most importantly, be patient and encourage patience. Look for and celebrate every bright spot.

Website resources:

- Dealing with Holiday Stress:
<http://www.hope-for-tomorrow.com/training/current/Dealing%20with%20Holiday%20Stress.doc>
- Managing Holiday Stress and the Blues (teen focus):
<http://www.health.ri.gov/family/ofyss/teens/tips/DisplayTip4.php>
- National Child Trauma Stress Network (includes responses for range of trauma)
http://www.ncetsnet.org/ncets/nav.do?pid=hom_main

Websites with Journal Ideas

- General Journal Writing prompts
http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/units/creative_writing/prompts.html
- Friendship Journals (younger children)
<http://www.youthonline.ca/friendship/bljournal.shtml>
- Writing exercises (lesson plans for teachers with writing prompts)
<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/blackyth/page2.htm> (Daily Writing & Self Esteem/Respect are most applicable).