

Stress in early childhood:

Helping children and their carers



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ISBN 1-921162-00-7

Printed by Paragon Printers, Canberra



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Introduction

What is stress?

Stress is a complex phenomenon. It has different meanings to different people and can be very subjective. What is stressful for one person might not be stressful for the next. It depends largely on background experiences, temperament and environmental conditions.

Stress has been defined variously as:

'... the non-specific response of the body to any demand that exceeds the person's ability to cope; as a person–environment relationship that threatens or taxes personal resources, and as a mental state in response to strains or daily hassles.' (Manning and Curtis, 1988; Allen, 1992.)

Occupational stress stems from conditions in the workplace. These conditions may either cause stress initially or aggravate the stress already present from other sources (Dillenburger, 2004).

Eustress and distress

Many people use the terms *stress* and *distress* as though they are interchangeable. The common view is that stress is something bad. Hans Selye, the 'father' of stress management, introduced the terms *distress* and *eustress*. According to Selye (1976), *distress* is 'damaging or unpleasant stress' (p. 31), where the core response is negative, painful and something to be avoided. *Eustress* describes a positive view of stress or a challenge—something to be sought out and used as an ally for personal and professional growth. Examples of *eustress* are anticipation of a holiday or the arousal needed to create a work of art. *Eustress* heightens awareness, increases mental alertness, and can lead to superior cognitive and behavioural performance (Rice, 1999).

The education and child care fields are not immune from this phenomenon. Stress is associated with problems of recruitment, health and retention of early childhood staff. Jarvis (2002) believes there are gaps in our understanding of teacher stress, most notably regarding effective interventions. This book aims to offer some practical and effective strategies for stress management in early childhood staff and the children in their care.

'The body's aim is to come back to a state of balance (homeostasis) after being stressed. This return to stability and balance is important for maintaining health and wellbeing.'

What is the stress response?

According to Montgomery and Evans (1995), the stress response is a state of arousal consisting of a number of bodily changes that present as feelings of being stressed. It also refers to the energy levels required for tackling the stressful situation.

The body's aim is to come back to a state of balance (homeostasis) after being stressed.

This return to stability and balance is important for maintaining health and wellbeing.

In extreme cases, this response is described as 'fight or flight'—see opposite. However, the response occurs so often in its mild form that it often passes unnoticed.

Stress becomes a problem when stress reactions are so severe, occur frequently or over a long period of time that the person is unable to handle them effectively. Stress also becomes a problem when a person constantly has feelings of being over-stretched, fatigued, having poor judgement, and achieving little in relation to the effort involved. As a consequence, the person is more susceptible to illness because the body's resistance to disease decreases under stress.

Cannon (1932) was the first writer to propose the 'fight or flight' response, meaning that when a person is stressed, the body is rapidly aroused and motivated by the sympathetic nervous system. The 'fight or flight' response prepares the body for action. The muscles tense, the heart rate escalates, thought becomes rapid, perspiration increases and breathing quickens. The body is ready to fight or run from the perceived threat. Back through the ages, this response was necessary for survival (the 'survival of the fittest'); for example, when the threat was physical danger, such as confrontation with a large, hungry animal.

What happens to the body when it enters the 'fight or flight' state?

- Breathing becomes shallow and rapid.
- The heartbeat increases.
- Blood pressure rises.
- Adrenaline and other hormones are released into the blood.
- The senses are heightened.
- The liver releases stored sugar into the blood.
- Muscles tense and tighten.
- Blood flow increases to the brain and major muscles and is constricted to the extremities.

In contemporary times, the more probable causes of stress are related to relationships, financial worries and performance anxieties. In our society it is not often necessary to fight to save our lives, but we still respond the same way to danger, whether real or imagined. This physiological response is no longer appropriate for the types of stress we commonly experience, but it comes into play whenever our stress levels increase. We can get into a state where the stress response is operating all the time. This can result in repression of stored-up energy or inappropriate release of it, often in negative or destructive ways. These can include reliance on alcohol, excessive eating, smoking and other drug abuse.

Other typical and harmful stress release responses are anger, emotional and psychological withdrawal, and depression. The danger lies in the stress reaction itself and how we choose to release or repress our stored-up energy.



Stress and children

If there is light in the soul, there is beauty in the person,
If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the house,
If there is harmony in the house, there will be order in the nation,
If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

Anonymous

In recent years, changes in childhood, family life and culture have caused early childhood professionals to seek new approaches to managing the stresses experienced by young children. It is possible to teach children proactive ways to manage stress from an early age. They can gain more personal control in their lives when they learn to relax, focus and de-stress.

Many professionals are worried that the task of growing up in today's stressful world is getting tougher. Although not all children are experiencing difficulty, increasing numbers apparently have fewer sources of adult support, affirmation and love than in the recent past. Many children are being pressured to grow up faster (Elkind, 1988; Kostelnik et al., 1998).

Childhood stresses are many and varied. These can range from day-to-day upsets about being teased by others or fighting over toys, to the damaging experience of being physically and sexually abused.

There are societal concerns about the growing numbers of chronically unhappy, hyperactive, or lethargic and unmotivated children now being seen by clinicians. If these youngsters' problems are not addressed, they may be inclined towards school failure, psychosomatic problems, and early involvement in antisocial behaviour and substance abuse. Such children have been described as the '*unwilling, unintended victims of overwhelming stress ... borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations*' (Elkind, cited in Kostelnik et al., 1998).

'Many professionals are worried that the task of growing up in today's stressful world is getting tougher.'

The research literature tends to highlight the impact of single-variable stressors on children's development. However, in real life, everyday situations, such as out-of-home care and school, children experience stress from multiple sources. Multiple stressors interact with one another and can have cumulative effects.

Furman (1995) believes that stresses affecting children should not be avoided when they or their derivatives impinge on the classroom—he believes they may offer optimal opportunities for effective early childhood education.

'... dealing effectively with stresses as well as with feelings, requires a cooperative relationship between the child's teachers and particularly between the teacher and the primary mothering person' (p. 33).

When child care professionals and families work collaboratively, children can become more resilient by learning to recognise and manage stress in their lives.

What are some of the causes of stress for young children?

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2002) reveal marked increases in the numbers of children receiving child care—both formal and informal. Other recent social trends indicate that people are working longer hours (often as unpaid overtime) and that increasing numbers of households are experiencing financial stress. Additionally, one in four children does not live with both their natural parents (ABS, 2002). Along with a significant proportion of the population (one in four) experiencing some form of mental illness, are the common disorders of anxiety, substance abuse and depression (ABS, 2002), which impact negatively on young children.

Australia has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world, and alcohol and drug disorders are increasing in young people. The activity levels of Australians are decreasing. Fewer and fewer Australians are participating in physical activities and sports, and more are experiencing the stress-related problems of a sedentary lifestyle. This is also leading to increased obesity levels in children and adults. Additionally, the '24/7' economy has permeated our lifestyles, where work can intrude anywhere and everywhere. Many workers are described as being perpetually attached to work via a digital 'leash'—pagers, mobile phones, palm devices and laptops. These factors impact upon adults and children alike (Thomas, 2003).

As a result of our living complex and fast-paced lives (Kostelnik et al., 1998), and as children's interactions broaden beyond the family, the child's world becomes potentially more stressful.

There is a wide range of causes of stress for young children (stressors). These include some children's personalities and temperaments. For example, some children never feel comfortable or happy in any setting, no matter how inclusive and diverse the program offered. Some children have difficulty getting along with their parents, peers, siblings and people in general. Kostelnik et al. and Miller (1996) describe a range of stressors experienced by children:

'Family life, which often serves as a buffer for children, also can be a source of stress for them. The ordinary aspects of family life may pile up to create demands for children that range from mildly stressful to overwhelming. The birth of a sibling, the death of a pet, breaking a favourite toy, getting caught stealing or lying, carelessly spilling milk, losing a grandparent, or bringing home a bad report card all can be either opportunities for growth or highly negative experiences, depending on the responses of significant adults.'

(Kostelnik et al., 1998, p. 135)

Family stressors include factors such as:

- separation and divorce of parents
- single-parent families
- blended families
- death
- working parents
- children in abusive or neglectful families and
- children in foster care.

Environmental stressors include:

- poor-quality child care
- stress in formal school settings
- cultural isolation
- stress and trauma as a result of fleeing from their homes, travelling to a new country, waiting for applications for refugee status to be approved (often in detention centres) and adapting to a new country
- health-related assaults, illness or hospitalisation
- disability
- learning difficulties
- the death of a pet
- a new baby in the family
- starting school
- bullying or teasing at school
- spending time with a number of caregivers
- long hours in care and after-school settings
- natural disasters
- war, terrorism and violence.

Greenman (2002) believes that crises can bring out the best and worst in all of us, but it is the adults' role to guide children towards thoughtfulness, caring, kindness and courage.

Pushing children to achieve too much at an early age can cause them to burn out. Some parents are so keen for their children to live up to their potential that they expect them to be busy and occupied nearly every waking moment. Elkind (1988) refers to this as 'forced blooming' and highlights the usurping of important play experiences for children by adult-directed extra-curricular activities. This rapid-paced, high-gear, fast-food society is often referred to as 'socially toxic'. Furthermore, many of the markers that indicated the passage from childhood to adulthood are becoming blurred, as children are increasingly encouraged to copy adult dress, aspirations and

behaviour (for example, becoming little 'stars' or models and being exposed to inappropriate images and interactions on the Internet, X-box games and television and movies). It is not surprising that, in our society, most children conclude that the status of personhood is attained by becoming a consumer.

The message from the marketplace to children is 'I buy, therefore I am.'

Success at school and in other activities is important and worthwhile, but not at the expense of children's wellbeing and happiness.

Children's responses to stress vary according to the individual child's temperament and personality, the child's developmental level and the child's previous life experience. Managing stress appears to be highly dependent on a child's developmental capabilities and coping skills.

'Pushing children to achieve too much at an early age can cause them to burn out.'



How do children experience stress?

There are two main categories of stressful experiences:

- Acute stress is a sudden intense onset of the stressful situation (e.g. a car accident).
- Chronic stress (e.g. the loss of a loved one) is ongoing and, according to Gunnar and Barr (1998), the most significant and detrimental for children. The effects include changing brain chemistry and function, and a lowering of resistance to disease.

In early childhood, we need to address the above concerns about stress in effective and creative ways so that carers of children and children themselves can learn about and practise stress management techniques that are holistic—working on the body, mind, emotions and spirit. Teachers, child care workers and parents all need to find a balance between encouraging children to experience success in life and encouraging them just to be children. Positive practices undertaken daily in child care and education settings can create a real difference in children's lives. Additionally, the carers, teachers and parents can work together and gain the benefits of holistic stress management techniques along with the children in their care.

Children's responses to stress

Chronic and acute stress are likely to have a negative and far-reaching impact upon the health, development and wellbeing of our children. If children are confronted with too many stressful situations, or if the stresses are too severe, the strain can become too great for them to handle (Rickard, 1996; Pearson, 1998; Greenman, 2002; Thomas, 2003). Stress impacts adversely on children's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, as well as their social skills and their ability to concentrate and learn (Honig, 1986; Elkind, 1988; Romano, 1992; Youngs, 1995; Thomas, 2003).

'Teachers, child care workers and parents all need to find a balance between encouraging children to experience success in life and encouraging them just to be children.'

Modelling empathy and compassion

Early childhood practitioners have very little control over the circumstances of children's lives outside the child care centre or the classroom. We can't prevent bad things from happening to children or eliminate harmful stressors from their lives. But we can look beyond what we deem as the 'inappropriate' behaviours and the responses children sometimes display in the classroom, to the real causes of stress in their lives. We can also model ways of dealing with stress to the children and their parents and exhibit calmness and strength in the face of difficulties. In this way we can treat all children and their families with compassion and understanding and, in turn, teach them the all-important life skills of learning to reduce their negative responses to stress.

Relaxation skills form an important part of self-coping skills for children and, when learned effectively, can stay with them throughout their lives.

Unlike adults, children are generally unable to verbalise their feelings, often not having the words to describe their fears and worries, nor are they able to take positive action towards managing stress when it arises.

Children react to stress and change in many ways, including:

- defence mechanisms, such as denial, regression, withdrawal and impulsive acting-out.

These stress responses can allow the child to temporarily gain a sense of control or balance. However, these defence mechanisms are generally not productive in the long term and can lead to more serious stress responses.

These include:

- panic
- depression
- irritability

- distractibility
- sleep disturbances and bedwetting
- self-harm
- pulling out their hair
- temper tantrums
- running away
- defying significant others
- unusual fears or preoccupations with death
- refusal to respond when others talk to them
- refusal to play with their peers.

(Kostelnik et al., 1998)

The long-term effects of stress

When children's stress symptoms are not recognised or managed effectively, long-term effects can be serious and may include behavioural and social problems, mental illness, ill health and lack of fulfilment, wellbeing, resilience and happiness in life.

Raynor and Montague (1999, cited in Deveson, 2003) reveal some important characteristics of resilient children. These include:

- emotional intelligence—which involves self-esteem and confidence
- the ability to create and maintain friendships
- a sense of purpose
- a set of values and beliefs
- an internal locus of control.

Parents, teachers and caregivers are concerned about the effect of stress on the lives of young children but are often at a loss as to how to deal with it (Youngs, 1995). Consequently, there is a risk of 'bandaid' measures or inappropriate 'quick fix' practices being adopted.

Developing resilient and happy children is the responsibility of early childhood practitioners, working in partnership with youngsters and their families. Arming children with a range of techniques and approaches to manage and reduce their stressful responses enhances their ability to learn, relate to others and feel good about themselves.

'Developing resilient and happy children is the responsibility of early childhood practitioners, working in partnership with youngsters and their families.'

The spiritual child

Mention of nurturing children's spirits is sparse in early childhood literature. The NSW Curriculum Framework for children's services states, '... spirituality is about reverence for life and appreciation of beauty in nature and creative endeavours' (2002, p. 72).

Early childhood practitioners are encouraged to develop in children an attitude of respect and caring for others and a deep sense of their own obligations to other life. Spirituality is also about respecting the religious customs and beliefs of all families in the children's service community.

One hundred years ago, Maria Montessori paved the way for early childhood practitioners to nurture children's spirits:

'If education recognises the intrinsic value of the child's personality and provides an environment suited to spiritual growth, we have the revelation of an entirely new child whose astonishing characteristics can eventually contribute to the betterment of the world.'

(Montessori, cited in Wolf, 2000).

Sadly, until recent times, this advice has been largely ignored.

Wolf poses the following questions to early childhood teachers and carers:

'The world our children will inhabit will be vastly different from anything we have experienced.'

- 'Who is to tell children that there is much more to life than accumulating more and more things?'
- 'Who is to tell them that their real value as human beings lies within themselves and how they treat others, rather than what they possess?'

One way to answer these questions is to introduce a stress management program into early childhood settings. This can take the form of daily rest and relaxation sessions, be part of environmental or values education, or stem from a focus on peace programs.

The world our children will inhabit will be vastly different from anything we have experienced. We are facing an era when issues of culture, difference and diversity need to be explored with compassion and humanity. When we educate children with a range of choices about how to respond to life challenges and stresses in calm and thoughtful ways, we are helping them face the challenges of this century with tolerance, freedom, openness, reverence, respect and compassion.





Transforming education through relaxation and reflection with children

Davis and Elliott (2003), writing about environmental sustainability and education for change, assert that current educational practices need an overhaul because they do not take a holistic, integrated, empowering approach. These writers, like Wolfe (2000), believe contemporary Western society has an obsession with material and monetary growth, the subjugation of nature, marginalisation of non-Western cultures and the manipulation of vulnerable groups to meet the demands of the economy (2003, p. 2). Accordingly, these writers believe that transformative education means having a focus on a variety of approaches to education, in order to help young children become resilient individuals, able to critically reflect upon and act knowledgeably, responsibly and creatively in a world of change (2003, p. 4).

A key tenet of a transformative approach to education is the necessity to help children cope with rapid change.

The holistic and integrated approaches offered in relaxation and awareness sessions provide the key to helping carers transform their practice and make significant changes in the lives of the children and families attending their service.

Part of transforming education means reassembling familiar classroom techniques into a workable model that focuses on high-quality student learning and improved outcomes for all learners. Productive pedagogy (NSWDET, 2002) draws teachers' and carers' attention to what really matters in helping children to learn. This approach requires attention to four 'dimensions'—intellectual quality (including higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversation, knowledge as problematic and metalanguage); relevance/connectedness (including connectedness to the world, problem-based curriculum, knowledge integration); a socially supportive classroom environment (including learner control and support of engagement, self-regulation, explicit criteria) and recognition of difference (including cultural knowledges, inclusivity, narrative, group identity and citizenship).

Human ecology is an area often overlooked when we are searching for ways to address the all-encompassing malaise of our time—stress. Human sustainability is possible only if our ethics and values undergo core changes—along with our lifestyles. Part of this lifestyle change involves learning how to balance our lives with quiet and replenishing techniques that provide rest, rejuvenation and hope. While education is not the complete answer (Davis & Elliott, 2003), education 'must be a vital part of all efforts to imagine and create new relations among people and to foster greater respect for the needs of the environment' (UNESCO, 1997, p.15, cited in Davis & Elliot, 2003).

Educating children for the 21st Century

We face an era when issues of culture and diversity need to be explored with compassion and humanity. What elements should form part of a child's 'toolkit' to face the challenges of this century?

- Tolerance—children need to appreciate that we subscribe to different religions, beliefs and philosophies and that this difference is healthy and democratic. Beginning to learn this at an early age increases children's chances of living in a peaceable world.
- Freedom—children need to learn that each individual has basic human rights and that one of these is to worship or not, as he or she sees fit, provided it doesn't harm another human being.

There are many forms of spirituality that human beings can embrace.

- Inquisitiveness—children can learn to find solutions to problems and to speak out and explore issues they sense as wrong. It is a basic human right to seek clarification of those things we don't understand.
- Openness to diversity—it is our duty as early childhood practitioners to help children learn something meaningful about other faiths, practices, and philosophies. Sharing books about different cultural practices, beliefs and lifestyles, and inviting parents and community members to the centre/school is a way of 'opening the door' to appreciation of multiculturalism and acceptance of all people.
- Reverence for and intimacy with nature—when we become alienated from our natural world, our view of our place in the world becomes distorted. Respect and care for the environment comes from helping children develop a sensibility that they are one part of the web of life and are connected spiritually to the planet.

We need to change the prevailing economic-driven world view to a sustainable, post-materialist world that embraces earth stewardship and the needs of future generations (Davis & Elliott, 2003).

- Respect for Indigenous traditions—it is important to cultivate in children a respect for native cultures and their spiritual traditions. Indigenous peoples have, in many instances, maintained an intimate connection with nature. When young children learn about native cultures and traditions, they are also building their own spiritual connections to the natural world.
- Compassion—we teach children compassion by being compassionate ourselves. Listening to children and validating their experiences communicates empathy and understanding. Allow children to observe you engaging in acts of compassion towards others, as well as taking care of yourself (Thomas, 2003).



The courage to transform

Many early childhood professionals, early years' teachers and parents are frustrated and at a loss as to how to bring calm and peace into children's daily lives. Remember, change is about taking the first step and doing things differently.

'If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always had.'

Making relaxation contagious

Children's stress can be contagious and spread through the care centre or school environment, creating an atmosphere which feeds even more stress. The following suggestions help parents and practitioners to guide children in positive and health-enhancing ways in the management of stress and the creation of an atmosphere of calm and relaxation in the early childhood environment.

A starting point

Before embarking on techniques to manage stress and build resilience in children, adults need to reflect upon their own lives. Many educators and parents want their children to learn to relax but fail to see how their own stressful behaviours affect those around them. The first step is for adults to recognise the causes of stress in their personal and professional lives and how they respond to these. Formulating a stress management plan and incorporating relaxation techniques into daily life will provide a strong basis for helping children manage their stress.

'The first step is for adults to recognise the causes of stress in their personal and professional lives and how they respond to these.'

The second part of this publication provides adults with a range of stress management ideas and techniques so that they can feel confident in handling the day-to-day stresses of working in early childhood care and education settings. This involves developing a commitment to the importance of providing a holistic and spiritual approach to developing techniques suitable for young children. It will also include being motivated to make changes to the environment, to changing attitudes about managing stress, as well as developing a philosophy (an ecology of relaxation) with families and other stakeholders in the setting.

This can be done through newsletters, documenting children's learning and responses in relaxation sessions, inviting parents to participate in the sessions, holding community workshops on topics such as stress management, relaxation techniques, wellbeing and goal setting. If parents are able to feel the benefits of a stress management program for themselves, they are more likely to incorporate some of these techniques at home with their children.

Adults are more readily able to identify their own stressors and verbalise their responses and feelings to stress than are children. Adults can help children learn to recognise stress and how their bodies and minds react to it. This can be done with young children through to teenagers. The concept of developing an 'ecology of relaxation' (Thomas, 2002; 2003) refers to staff and parents developing a complete, over-riding philosophy and environment for children that incorporates balance in their lives through experiences of self-awareness, peace, calm and relaxation. This is in contrast to simply imposing one-off relaxation techniques when children's behaviour becomes unacceptable to the adults around them and the aim is to quieten children down.

The first step in establishing positive techniques with children is the inclusion of a daily time set aside for relaxation sessions. They can include gentle exercises using the breath and the body; progressive relaxation techniques; visualisation processes; a 'sharing' circle' and time for creative expression for the children to reflect upon and document their responses to their experiences. This mindset shift involves planning daily opportunities in care, school and home settings to allow children to simply 'be' (Thomas & Shepherd, 2000) rather than emphasising 'doing' and 'producing' all day. Once children have learned some ways to use relaxation to help them manage their stress symptoms and negative responses, they can begin to see the benefits of these techniques and will want to keep using them. In this way, we can guide children in life-long methods of experiencing the 'magic' and wonder of everyday life and also in coping with the difficult situations that life presents to them.

Rickard (1994, p. 3) believes that relaxation skills should be viewed as valuable life skills, like many others we learn in childhood, and states:

'If we learn (relaxation skills) early in life, and learn them well, they can become building blocks on which we can develop further skills at a later stage. They can also provide us with positive automatic responses in many frightening and overwhelming situations. They can empower us and positively affect the way we respond to important events in our life.'

Tai Chi (gentle exercise) for children

Eastern traditions have much to offer when we are considering how to incorporate relaxation strategies into the early childhood day. Tai Chi (Qi Gong) is an ancient form of gentle, slow, repetitive movements developed in China. Gentle Qi Gong exercise, involving learning how to use the breath to bring the body back into balance and harmony, provides a necessary first step in the relaxation process:



'Before the mind can relax, the body must learn to relax'
(Madders, 1987).

While concentrating on their bodies, children become more focused on themselves and begin to slow down physically, mentally and emotionally. The slow movements of Qi Gong exercise enhance strength, flexibility, balance and coordination. These exercises are holistic: they are beneficial to the mind, body and spirit.

When Qi Gong exercise is followed by simple progressive muscle relaxation and visualisation techniques (going on an imaginary, peaceful 'journey'), children learn to quieten their minds from incessant chatter and worry. Children restore balance and re-energise their bodies, explore their creative imagination, and soothe away anxiety and fear.

Breathing, Qi Gong exercises and visualisation techniques may be done either in small groups or individually. They are effective ways of reaching the 'relaxation response' as an antidote to the 'stress response'.

Children need a peaceful household and/or a peaceful child care centre and opportunities for respite from stressful situations (Greenman, 2002). Relaxation sessions provide this respite and allow children to value quiet, reflective time where they focus on images of peace, calm, beauty

and positivity. We can build respectful, positive relationships with children by spending time practising relaxation techniques together and developing enjoyable, simple strategies for coping with life. Investing in a relaxation time each day will reap benefits in enhanced communication, trusting relationships, respect and positive enjoyment of sharing this 'soul' time together. In turn, this promotes resilience as children learn about connectedness, belongingness, dignity and opportunity through positive, secure relationships (Seita, Mitchell & Tobin, 1996, cited in Rolfe, 2002).

The benefits of using relaxation techniques with children include:

- providing mind and body rest and replenishment
- allowing children to simply 'be'
- opening to creativity and imagination
- offering time-out and solitude from busy, rushed days
- introducing life-coping skills
- providing enjoyable, uplifting experiences
- learning how to use the breath, body and imagination to let go of worry and fear
- learning to listen to others, appreciating others' experiences and stories
- waiting turns to talk
- respecting others' feelings and ideas
- feeling 'good' about themselves.

Crook (1988, p. 8) expands on these benefits and describes the experiences of disturbed and troubled children to whom she introduced relaxation techniques:

'Gradually, children understand that, when they do release their body tensions, they experience a quiet calmness within themselves—a really comfortable and happy experience that they are happy to try and work towards again. Once the individual child has tasted this state in him/herself, everything flows easily. He/she is enthusiastic about doing relaxation and will try new things ... he/she trusts you (the teacher).'

Creating a special place

One way of introducing relaxation time in early childhood settings is to choose a suitable area for the relaxation session and set it up with the children, using any objects that bring a relaxing and comfortable ambience to the space. This will also involve discussing the difference between feeling stressed ('yucky', bad, sick, 'mad') and relaxed ('good', soft, calm, kind, happy). It may be approached by reading and discussing an appropriate story or using a puppet to introduce the relaxation theme. Adults can then find out what children would like to include in their relaxation area (rather than imposing an aesthetic on them). This can include posters of beautiful scenery, lamps, electric oil burners, floating flowers or leaves in a bowl, soft cushions, a fish tank, exotic draping materials, potted plants, flowers, mobiles and ambient music. Once a few relaxation sessions have been shared with the children, drawings and paintings of their 'imaginary journeys' can be added.

As with any new experience, it is important to outline the aims and expectations of the relaxation session and explain what the children will be doing during this time. For example: 'This is a quiet time where we will learn to focus on our breathing and join in some simple

exercises to help our bodies relax. After that we will all lie on the floor and teach our body parts to relax and let go. When we have done this, we will imagine that we are going on a relaxing journey.' It is always useful to begin with some simple warm-up and breathing exercises. These can then be followed with a few Qi Gong movements. The progressive relaxation and visualisation techniques follow on naturally from these movements. The children are asked to lie on the floor in their 'own space' and go on a 'journey' to a rainforest, a garden, a mountain, a cloud or another special, peaceful place that the children and staff have created together. The relaxation session is best concluded with the children sitting up and forming a 'sharing circle' where they discuss their experiences and decide whether they would like to represent their responses (sights, sounds, feelings) in a painting, drawing or sculpture (Thomas, 2002). Relaxation experiences help children learn to act in positive ways rather than react to the environment and those around them.

Learning to relax does not come easily for many adults, so we need to remember that it will take time and effort to help children relax their bodies, minds and spirits through the process outlined above.

The above information outlines a 'relaxation session' suitable for daily use (about 20 to 30 minutes duration). However, parts of this session can be used at other times of the day when a short break is needed so that the children can re-energise. For example, do some simple breathing exercises, complete a few stretches, perform one or two Tai Chi movements, or sit quietly in a circle and spend a few moments gazing at a candle or a flower while practising gentle restorative breathing. Other ideas for short relaxation breaks during the day include the following:

For babies

- Baby massage (seek parent permission first). Gently massage baby's shoulders, arms, hands, chest, tummy, on to the legs and down to the feet. If permitted, pour a little warmed oil onto your hands to soothe and relieve upset babies.
- Soft music—classical, relaxation, lullabies or ambient music can be restful and reassuring for some babies.
- Dim the lights to create a sense of rest and quiet.
- Rocking—when appropriate, cradle the baby in your arms and talk to her/him quietly in reassuring tones.
- Wrapping—some babies under four months feel secure and cosy if they are wrapped in a light blanket. Make sure their arms are free.
- Patting—gently patting a baby on the back or bottom while he or she is lying down to rest might be soothing.
- Some babies are soothed by motion, such as a ride in a pram.
- Provide an aesthetic environment for babies' interest and reassurance such as using soft colours, attractive posters, mobiles, wall hangings, soft toys and calm voices.
- Provide a relaxation mat—indoors, or outdoors on a fine day, and add soft toys for babies to play with and explore.



For toddlers

- Provide a variety of relaxation music such as ambient, nature sounds, light classical, soft chanting, lullabies, music from a range of cultures. Repetition of favourite pieces of music can be calming and reassuring for toddlers.
- Provide an aesthetic environment by including soft furnishings, quiet corners for rest and privacy, posters, plants, mobiles, a relaxation book corner with cushions and a soft rug, soft toys, exploratory toys such as sealed cylinders filled with liquid and sparkling floating objects such as charms and sequins, for toddlers to explore and manipulate.
- Introduce movement experiences such as gentle bending and stretching, creative dancing, simple Qi Gong exercises.
- Provide a relaxation mat where the children can explore soft toys, or manipulate fabrics and objects with soft, textural appeal.

For preschoolers and beyond

- Same as for toddlers and ...
- Extend the movements and exercises—breathing, warm-ups, Tai Chi (Qi Gong), simple, easy yoga exercises for children.
- Introduce progressive relaxation such as lying down and learning to relax muscles groups in sequence.
 - ◆ learning to value lying still and just 'being'.
 - ◆ introduce a short visualisation story or script where the children imagine a favourite quiet, secure place with verbal guidance from an adult. Build on these experiences and vary the 'destination' to places like a beach, a mountain, a forest, the garden and so on.

- ◆ teach self-massage. Help children to learn how to gently stroke their own face and hands; make gentle circles with their fingers around the back of the neck, head, tummy and lower back.

- ◆ begin reading stories with a relaxation theme or books about nature/spirituality. This can take place on the relaxation mat indoors or outdoors.

- Follow relaxation time with a discussion and some creative expression such as drawing, modelling, painting, patterning, so the children can represent their visualisations and responses to the relaxation experience.
- Use sand trays for quiet explorations alone or with a friend.
- Provide relaxing water play such as blowing bubbles, bathing dolls in warm soapy water, filling and emptying containers.
- Introduce life learning skills to the relaxation program such as listening to poems, stories, songs, rhymes, other children's ideas and responses; sharing and waiting for a turn; respecting others; valuing nature; just 'being'.



Relaxation for children with special needs

Children with disabilities

Children with physical disabilities, such as those with mobility, vision or hearing impairments, can gain rest and replenishment from a daily relaxation program. These children often become fatigued and frustrated because of the effort, persistence, muscle control and concentration required to manage the activities that other children do more easily. Muscle aches and cramps, problems with concentration, sleepiness, irritability and behaviour problems are indicators of fatigue in children with disabilities. Teachers and carers can be alert to these symptoms and provide the child with short breaks during the day. A relaxation session is a welcome and soothing part of their day, as they can participate at their own level of interest or energy. Checking with parents and allied health professionals such as physiotherapists will help teachers determine a suitable relaxation routine and plan appropriate exercise choices to improve overall muscle strength, endurance and flexibility. Children with disabilities can easily participate in Tai Chi, or some simple yoga or relaxation experiences, with help from an adult. This assistance can take the form of individual instruction, modelling (close physical contact, or tracing the movements with the child's arms, using photos or visual cues), peer tutoring and reinforcement, clear communication with signs, gestures or oral language.

Children with challenging behaviours

These children will benefit from a daily relaxation session but may take a little longer than the other children to be motivated to join in. Consult with parents to find out how their child relaxes at home. Collaborate with them on the elements of the relaxation routine so they can try the ideas out at home. This will provide consistency and familiarity for the child. Staff can begin to introduce the above techniques slowly on a 1:1 basis or with one or two other children. Be guided by the child's interests and try to incorporate these into the visualisation scripts (for example, if a child is constantly wanting to play with a teddy bear, encourage him/her to bring it to the relaxation area and teach him to 'help the bear relax'. You may even wish to incorporate the bear into a relaxation script.

Provide clear expectations and directions to the child but never force him or her to lie down or keep eyes closed. Allow the child to slowly accept the relaxation experience in his or her own way. Start with short periods (e.g. five minutes for the first few sessions) and gradually build up to longer sessions. Develop ritual and routine. For example, use the same music, do relaxation exercises at the same time each day, repeat the exercises and stories so they become familiar and reassuring for the child. In time, these children will come to look forward to relaxation, and, when they understand that they can help their own bodies to calm down, they will be able to start using the techniques in other situations at school and at home.

Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds

Consult the parents and Indigenous community members and discuss ways that these children can learn to relax. Provide extra security and comfort for the children by sitting them on your lap and gently stroking their hair or their back (if they want you to do this). Incorporate elements of Aboriginal culture into the relaxation session such as Dreamtime stories, Aboriginal music, Australian native animals and images of the Australian landscape.

Include fabric and objects reflecting Aboriginal culture in your design of the relaxation space. Always consult the local Indigenous community and parents. Perhaps some local stories, books and music will be available for you to use with the children. Allow the children to come to the relaxation sessions in their own way and in their own time. Invite members of the Aboriginal community to join the sessions.

All children will benefit from hearing Aboriginal stories and music during relaxation sessions.

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

A relaxation program is an ideal way to provide inclusive experiences for children from a range of cultural backgrounds. Incorporate music and stories/scripts from other cultures (especially those represented in your centre, but not exclusively). Consult with the parents about their ideas on what can be included in the session. Vary the contents of the sessions in order to represent different landscapes, languages and traditions. For example, Tai Chi is a mainstream exercise in China, so it will be familiar to many people from Asian cultures. Yoga exercise, practised widely across the world, originated in India. Dress the relaxation space with objects and materials from a range of countries and cultures. Invite members of all your parent groups to join your relaxation sessions.

As well as calling on relaxation skills in troubled times, children can learn positive habits early in their lives and experience the richness and creativity of a fluid, graceful body and an imaginative, active mind. If we wish for children to have hope, optimism, fulfilment, resilience and wellbeing in their lives, adults need to guide the way with ideas and practices that enhance these qualities. The alternative is a life of personal and intellectual mediocrity and impoverishment (Thomas, 2003).

*'For the cause of worldwide peace and harmony,
May it begin in hearts of children and spread.'*
(Fields and Boesser, 1994, iv.)



Stress in carers of young children

In order for staff in children's services to effectively face the challenges of their job—and most importantly enjoy their work—they need to know how to look after themselves. Factors such as health, happiness, job satisfaction and interpersonal relationships are influenced by the way we react to stress. In turn, these factors impact on the way we approach our work. Stressors or causes of stress are demands or pressure placed on the individual which can cause them to feel tense, unhappy or uncomfortable. Examples of stressors are a forthcoming wedding, writing exams, being 'told off' by one's boss, being burgled, being gridlocked in traffic jams, meeting deadlines or moving house.

Jorde-Bloom (1982, p. 11), describes burnout as:

'... a stubborn and elusive problem. It is characterised by a slow and progressive wearing down of the body and spirit. At its extreme, burnout has the power to render immobile otherwise healthy, competent individuals. Control slips away, the situation deteriorates, capacity to perform diminishes and further stress results.'

Current literature on the topic (Greenberg, 1999; Thomas, 2002) indicates that it is our actions and responses to stressful situations in life that are important and not the situation itself.

Developing a balance in life

Early childhood staff can work towards reducing the stressors in their lives (see page 20) in order to return to balance or homeostasis. Stress can be reduced by implementing simple daily strategies at work and at home (Jones, 1992).

Stretching herself too thin, she breaks her connections.

Staying too busy, she has no time.

Doing for others, she neglects herself.

Defining herself only through others, she loses her own definition.

The wise woman waters her own garden first.

(Metz and Tobin, 1995.)



Causes of stress in early childhood services

Early childhood carers from a range of services (long day care, family day care, preschool, school, before- and after-school care, vacation care) frequently identify the following factors that cause them stress:

- lack of support
- money worries
- clutter
- heavy workload
- expectations of others
- lack of time
- impositions from others
- relationships
- studying as well as working
- lack of resources
- inflexible routines
- clash with leadership style
- accidents
- lack of/inconsistent communication
- noisy/disruptive behaviour of children in child care
- challenging behaviours of their own children/teenagers at home
- too many commitments
- barriers and stereotypes (e.g. for male workers)

- families/parents of children in care
- feeling undervalued and unappreciated
- unrealistic workloads
- poor time management/organisation skills
- unhelpful approaches/attitudes to stress
- poor team spirit
- conflicts in the workplace
- no formal stress-care awareness policy
- wider global issues (injustices, terrorism threats, war).

How early childhood staff feel when they are stressed

Staff are often left feeling depleted, frustrated and unappreciated at the end of a working week. When asked about how they feel when they are experiencing stress, early childhood staff relate the following:

- tired
- incompetent
- guilty
- tight
- unmotivated
- stretched in all directions
- unable to concentrate
- impatient
- confused
- hopeless
- tense
- useless
- isolated
- out of control
- angry
- numb
- disillusioned
- frustrated
- lonely
- in 'limbo'
- helpless
- unnerved
- unsettled
- panicky
- disoriented
- powerless.



Negative feelings and responses such as the above can become contagious in busy early childhood services. It is important for staff to regularly monitor their stress reactions and how they are feeling about their job, workplace and personal lives.

A stress rating scale

Simple self-assessment can occur through a self-awareness exercise such as rating the number of times some common stress symptoms have been experienced by the individual. A scale from 0 (meaning hardly ever experienced) through to 3 (experienced frequently) helps people to decide if their stress levels may become a problem.

For example:

I feel nervous, tense, anxious, ill-at-ease ...

I feel on edge and over-excited.

I worry excessively.

I have difficulty concentrating.

I generally feel irritable.

My heart pounds rapidly.

My breath is short and rapid.

My stomach becomes upset.

I perspire easily.

I become light-headed or faint.

My blood pressure is high.

My hands and fingers tremble.

My muscles become tense and stiff.

I clench my jaw.

I experience headaches or eye tension.

I have lower back pain.

I feel tired all the time.

I am short-tempered.

I become withdrawn.

My appetite has changed.

I suffer from insomnia.

I stay in bed/sleep too long.

I have minor accidents/ make mistakes.

I use more drugs/alcohol.

I am achieving less than normal.

(The above examples are not exhaustive but provide a guide to determining severity of stress levels.)



Stress is a problem for organisations

The increasing incidence of stress in the early childhood field is creating problems for organisations, such as reduced performance, increased levels of absenteeism, staff turnover, low morale and motivation, and the high monetary costs of stress claims. High personal costs arise when staff and management do not address stress issues effectively and, as a result, levels of care, education and relationships are adversely affected. All of these factors diminish the quality of early childhood services. Nurturing and meeting the needs of others has resulted in burnout for many early childhood staff (originally reported by Jorde-Bloom in 1982) and continues to be identified by members of the field (Rodd, 1998).

While excessive or prolonged stress can have a negative impact on professional performance and role satisfaction, stress is not inherently harmful. On the contrary, if managed effectively, it can enhance motivation and effort and thus contribute to professional growth and development (Jelinek, 1986). Thus, the increasingly serious phenomenon of burnout and attrition in the early years of teaching may also be alleviated (Sumsion & Thomas, 1995).

Stress can help professionals achieve their personal and work goals, and it can bring anticipation into life, as with a holiday or a celebration. Stress helps people to grow and change and also to avoid danger.

'Stress helps people to grow and change and also to avoid danger.'

It is possible to be under-stimulated as well as over-stimulated.

Brief, purposeful periods of over-stimulation are often necessary. However, we should aim to spend most of our time in the stress comfort zone (which will be different for each individual).

When stress increases, so does performance and wellbeing until the stress comfort zone is reached. At the beginning of this zone, extra stress is handled with ease. Early childhood staff should be ready to use their stress management skills as they approach the point of over-stimulation. The idea is for individuals to work out how much stress is right for them.

One way of avoiding burnout for staff is to ensure that a balance is created between meeting the needs of others and meeting our own needs (Rodd, 1998). One of the keys to learning how to manage stress is to become more aware of what you feel like when stress takes hold.

Asking yourself the following questions may help:

- What happens to me when I am stressed?
- How do I feel?
- How does my body react to stress?
- How do I like to relax?
- What happens to my body when I relax?

Our responses to these questions will provide a balanced mindset from which to launch into a stress management program.

We can take positive steps to change and modify our stress responses, and play an active role in determining whether or not we will allow stress to affect us in negative ways.

Signs and symptoms of stress in early childhood practitioners

Child care staff should become aware of early signs and symptoms of stress and begin to put positive strategies in place before the stress reactions become severe.

Symptoms and signs of stress commonly reported by early childhood practitioners include:

- forehead tension
- tension headaches
- migraine headache
- eye strain
- tight neck and shoulders
- head feels 'hollow'
- crying frequently
- breathing difficulties
- irregular heart rate
- fatigue
- nausea or stomach 'butterflies'
- muscle tension, cramps and spasms
- palpitations
- shaking
- irritability

- jaw tension (Bruxism)
- poor judgement
- loss of appetite
- skin rashes and problems such as eczema
- digestive disorders
- bowel disorders, e.g. diarrhoea
- nausea
- stomach ulcers/mouth ulcers
- cold hands and feet
- insomnia
- becoming forgetful
- sexual difficulties
- feeling flushed
- feeling cool or damp; and
- teeth grinding.

(This list is not exhaustive. Note also that these signs can also indicate symptoms of illness other than stress.)



Unproductive habits

Early childhood staff report a range of inappropriate behavioural responses to stress. These are generally unproductive habits we adopt to give ourselves a 'quick fix', but relying on these habits in the long term is likely to produce negative consequences and increase, rather than alleviate, stress levels. It is important to recognise these habits and to try to replace them with more productive stress management strategies such as those suggested in this book.

Some unproductive stress habits are:

- smoking
- drinking alcohol
- reliance on coffee or other caffeinated drinks
- eating 'junk', overly-processed, fatty, sugar-laden food
- comfort eating
- not eating/over-eating
- chocolate 'fixes'
- sugar/fat fixes
- too much TV
- dwelling on problems
- drugs

- blaming others
- yelling/screaming
- withdrawing
- shopping (spending money we don't have, to buy what we don't need, to impress people we don't like!)
- over-working
- procrastinating
- being a perfectionist
- thinking negatively
- nail-biting
- hair fiddling/pulling
- incessant talking
- inability to sit still for sustained periods
- excessive self-criticism
- inability to listen well
- inconsistent communication
- poor direction setting
- more accident/mistake prone
- inconsistent priorities
- reluctant adaptation to change
- inability to assess one's work and decisions properly.

Long-term effects of stress

If stress is not reduced, it can have long-term effects on our health, such as:

- allergies
- ulcers
- high blood pressure
- strokes
- angina and heart attacks
- apnoea
- cancers
- substance abuse
- eczema
- hyperventilation
- immune system depression
- irritable bowel syndrome
- phobias
- psoriasis
- shingles
- strokes.

(Holden, 1992; Wilson, 1995; 1997)

If people can't easily stop themselves from feeling tense, it is wise to learn a productive habit like relaxation that will eventually replace the habit of tension if practised frequently.

Relaxation is the opposite of stress

When learning to manage stress, the aim is to reach the 'relaxation response' (Benson, 1974) whereby the body brings itself back into a state of physical, mental and emotional balance. Benson reviewed relaxation and meditative practices from both the East and West and concluded that these practices enable people to reduce stress by activating an in-built biological mechanism (called the 'relaxation response').

When we experience the 'relaxation response', our breathing rate slows, the sympathetic nervous system activity decreases, heart rate lessens, blood pressure is lowered and the body's metabolism slows down. This response brings a sense of ease, calm and wellbeing into play.

Benson found that it was generally necessary to have four preconditions to trigger the relaxation response:

- A quiet environment. This contributes to the effectiveness of relaxation/visualisation directions, the repeated word or phrase or self-instructions, by making it easier to eliminate distracting thoughts or sounds
- A mental tool. To shift the mind from preoccupation with worries and distracting thoughts, there needs to be a mental stimulus. For example, a sound, a word, a phrase repeated silently or aloud; a relaxation script; or fixed gazing at an object (such as a candle flame). 'Mind wandering' is one of the major blocks to triggering the relaxation response. Attending to the normal rhythm of breathing helps
- A passive attitude. When distracting thoughts occur, it is important to accept them but not to become preoccupied with them. Trying to blank out or empty the mind of all thoughts will only set up tension
- Finding the time. Our days are so full of activities, habits and commitments and we lament that there is never enough time for regular relaxation practice (twice a day is recommended). We need to ask ourselves the question—what value do you really give to the reduction of stress in your life?

Getting time for ourselves often involves negotiating with family members or friends so that 'time out' to relax becomes a regular feature of daily life.

Remember that hurried parents and teachers produce harried children. Adults who are feeling 'stressed-out' are not going to be able to help children learn to relax.

The benefits of relaxation techniques

Some relaxation and stress management techniques will make an immediate difference to your feelings of physical and mental wellbeing. Others will take a little longer to have effect, but their effects will be long-lasting if practised regularly.

'Remember that hurried parents and teachers produce harried children.'

Benefits of relaxation include:

- lowering of blood pressure
 - regulating breathing
 - relieving muscle tension
 - breaking the cycle of tiredness
 - increasing stamina and endurance
 - improving mood
 - coping better with anxieties
 - reducing negative thought patterns
 - enhancing brain power
 - becoming more resilient
 - becoming emotionally stronger
 - improving problem-solving abilities
 - become more calm and tolerant
 - enhancing feelings of invigoration and rejuvenation
 - developing a more positive attitude towards life.
- (Hayward, 1999; Greenman, 2002; Thomas, 2002, 2003).

Developing a stress management plan

- Identify the major causes of stress in your life.
- Make a list of the common stress symptoms you experience.
- Set goals and put strategies into place to overcome these.
- Note anything that might inhibit you when trying to implement these strategies. (For example: your goal is to get up early and walk to the park before work. A barrier to achieving this might be that the mornings are getting cooler and you don't feel like getting out of bed.)
- Suggest ways of overcoming these barriers. (For example: plan to go walking with a friend or neighbour—you will not want to keep them waiting on a street corner while you are deciding whether to get up or not!)
- Have a stress management 'buddy'. Make an agreement with a friend or colleague to work together on strategies to manage your stress.
- Monitor your progress regularly (and change your goals if necessary).
- Reward yourself when you've achieved a goal.



Developing a repertoire of stress management strategies

By including the following strategies in a daily routine, the ability to manage stress will increase. This will result in higher energy levels and a calmer, more positive response to the challenges faced in all areas of life. The following suggestions are not gender-specific and are designed to meet the needs of a diverse range of people. People with vision, hearing or mobility impairments can benefit from most of the suggestions. The ideas and techniques have wide appeal as they are derived from a range of cultural backgrounds, such as Tai Chi from China and yoga from India. Effective stress management strategies start with you adopting an optimistic attitude.

Attitude

Take time to think ... it is the source of power.

Take time to play ... it is the secret of perpetual youth.

Take time to read ... it is the fountain of wisdom.

Take time to pray (or reflect) ... it is the greatest power on earth.

Take time to love and be loved ... it is a sacred privilege.

Take time to be friendly ... it is the road to happiness.

Take time to laugh ... it is the music of the soul.

Take time to give ... the day is too short to be selfish.

Take time to work ... it is the price of success.

Take time to do charity ... it is the key to compassion.

(Original author unknown.)

Starting out

- Make a commitment to managing stress.
- Develop a personal and professional philosophy around self-awareness and stress management (called 'an ecology of relaxation' in Thomas, 2002; 2003). Take a holistic approach (focusing on the body, mind and spirit) and ensure that you don't sabotage your efforts by 'saying one thing and doing another'.
- Focus on the positive—be thankful for the gifts in your life. Often when we are suffering from stress we only think about what we *don't* have. It is important to keep a balanced perspective and acknowledge all the good things in our lives (such as a place to live, a job, good health, people who care about us, a loving pet, a beautiful garden, etc.).
- Set realistic goals and review your progress in achieving these.
- Use positive affirmations to help you achieve your aspirations in life. Affirmation (or autosuggestion) is a technique that involves the repetition of carefully chosen words or sentiments. We can achieve our goals and change unproductive habits through the use of these simple statements. The repetition influences the sub-conscious and can become self-fulfilling.

For example:

'I am now calm and relaxed.'

'I now eat healthy fresh food every day.'

'I exercise three times a week to keep my body and mind in good shape.'

'I am organised and efficient at work.'

- Make time for yourself.
- Call on positive and supportive people in difficult times.

Communication skills

Early childhood practitioners often feel they have little personal control over a stressful situation and therefore feel powerless to change or ameliorate it. According to Rodd (1998), it is possible to manage stress by changing the way we perceive a situation.

Seeing stress as an opportunity for change and growth on the job or in our personal lives can allow us to tolerate life's uncertainties. Anticipating change is vital when working in a 'people profession', and an astute professional will facilitate the implementation of change rather than try to deny or block it. Part of a practitioner's role is to develop the necessary skills to perform the job well. Improving skills that are related to stress management, such as assertion and conflict management, will allow for appropriate expression of feelings and an ability to meet the challenges of the job with confidence.

People who work in the area of interpersonal and workplace relations believe that conflict and the resultant stresses in life are inevitable but that we can all learn to manage conflict effectively.

It is advisable to tackle conflicts early, rather than when they become critical. The techniques of active listening, assertion and conflict mapping help us to do this.

Active or reflective listening:

People who are good listeners show others that they are interested in them and respect them. Effective listeners establish secure trusting relationships and do the following in a conversation:

- ▶ Show that they are listening by their non-verbal behaviour, such as facing the speaker; giving the speaker their undivided attention; using minimal encouragers such as nodding or smiling; listening to the whole message and reflecting back to the speaker that their message has been understood.
- ▶ Use active listening, which involves paraphrasing—using your own words to reflect back to the speaker what they have said (e.g. 'So you are feeling upset that the director changed the rosters without consulting you?'). It involves checking that you have understood the meaning (e.g. 'So in other words ... you are not going to agree to the latest roster change?'). This reassures the speaker that they have been heard, it allows them to clarify their meaning if you have misinterpreted the message, and it also allows them to continue talking. This is a far better approach than bringing into play the common listening behaviour that most people employ (often called 'communication

blockers'). These 'blockers' include judging, giving advice, moralising, preaching, probing, questioning, ordering, being overly sympathetic and offering solutions. The stress produced by ineffective listening can be avoided if staff learn good listening techniques and implement them in the workplace.

► Be assertive—another communication skill that can help alleviate stress, both in the workplace and in personal situations. 'I-messages' enable individuals to stand up for their rights and express their opinions. 'I-messages' are a special way of saying how you respond to a situation. Learning to use this technique comfortably takes a deal of practice, so don't give up if it doesn't work at first!

The advantage of using an 'I-message' is that you are able to tell another person how you feel about what they have said or done, without blaming them or demanding that they change. 'I-messages' help you to 'hold your ground' instead of treating the other person as if they were your opponent. They avoid defensiveness, blame, innuendos, and terms such as 'should', 'never' and 'always'. They are particularly useful if you are feeling angry, upset or irritated. When we tell others what to do, they often resist. 'I-messages' take the following form:

'When ... I feel ... and what I'd like is ...'

The pronoun 'you' is *never* used in an 'I-message'. For example, rather than saying 'I'm so sick of the way you always change rosters without asking me. Don't think I'm going to work late shift again this week', an 'I-message' would say 'When rosters are changed without any discussion, I feel annoyed and I'd like to be consulted in future.'

Fundamental to becoming more assertive is the ability to say 'no' when you are feeling over-stretched, rather than taking on more and more responsibilities. When differences or upsets arise, know whose problem it is and don't 'own' problems that aren't yours.

Conflict mapping is an effective way of charting the needs and fears of each person involved in a conflict situation. Before launching into an argument or going straight to the other person to 'give them a piece of your mind', take time to write down the source of the conflict. Next, write down each person's needs. What motivates them in this situation? What concerns or anxieties are influencing their behaviour? List the areas you have in common. Brainstorm possible options for resolving the conflict. This strategy will help you to address the problem calmly, provide a balanced perspective, and offer thoughtful alternatives so that both parties win, rather than setting up a win-lose or a lose-lose scenario.



Time management

Learning some time management techniques will help you to reduce stress by being more in control of the time you have available, thus being more productive (Cairo, 1997).

Be alert for time-wasters that erode our days and leave us feeling overwhelmed with accumulating responsibilities. Common time-wasters include:

- telephone conversations
- email
- time on the internet
- interruptions
- distractions
- commuting time
- not saying 'no'
- procrastination
- not planning
- perfectionism (almost nothing seems right)
- resistance to asking for help
- resistance to learning new ways of doing things
- daydreaming
- disorganisation (can't find anything)
- friends dropping in
- leaving work unfinished
- lack of self-discipline
- indecision
- lack of personal priorities
- fatigue
- socialising
- spending too much time planning or 'getting organised'
- over-commitment (attempting too much at once)
- add your own time 'leaks' ...

Once you have identified your major time 'leaks', make a list of your most pressing time management problems. Beside each one, devise a specific action that you can take to reduce the problem or eliminate it entirely. Aim to eliminate one time-waster from your list each week (Percy, 1989).

Start each day by setting aside five or so minutes to plan your time. During this time you can order your desk, set the day's objectives and gather your thoughts. Make a list of all the things you need to do and then place these in order of priority. Always work on your top priority first. Break projects down into smaller parts so that you don't become overwhelmed by a project as soon as you start it. You can then tackle it piece by piece and never know how big it is until it's finally done! Don't fall into the trap of putting the 'hard things' off in order to do easier, less important tasks.

Try to ask yourself this question several times a day:

'Am I making the best use of my time right now?'

Identify your body rhythms and use them to your advantage. For example, are you a 'morning person' or an 'afternoon person'?

Let your biorhythms guide you towards the times of the day when you have the best energy to undertake important tasks.

'Make a list of all the things you need to do and then place these in order of priority.'

Use waiting time productively. We all have to wait for appointments, trains/buses, meetings to begin, and so on. Use this time to make lists, read important material (e.g. articles, pamphlets, brochures), plan schedules, relax to music from an I-pod or Walkman.

When you are tired or are surrounded by noise and distractions, use this time to tidy up, sort out your desk, prepare materials and resources—things that don't require much concentration.

Don't over-structure your day. Never fill up your schedule completely. By leaving yourself available for emergency meetings or unexpected jobs, you'll be less anxious about your ability to schedule in 'just one more thing' (Golisek, 1993).

Slay the dragon of procrastination because this habit makes deadlines harder to meet. Know when your deadlines are and develop an effective reminder system to keep on schedule with projects.

Finally, schedule breaks and use them wisely. Instead of using lunch or coffee breaks to catch up on unfinished or extra work, spend 'down time' doing something completely unrelated to work. This will refresh your attitudes and job outlook.

The environment

- Remove clutter—an organised environment helps to create a calm, organised mind.
- Create comfortable environments at work and at home (e.g. soft furnishings, places for privacy and retreat). This place can be called your 'sacred space' and can be used for your special relaxation times. In the workplace, introduce soft, aesthetically pleasing furniture items, such as lounge chairs, cushions, soft fabrics and hangings, and any other elements that bring a relaxing feel to the indoor environment.
- A wall hanging in my home office displays the following anonymous words of wisdom and enlightenment—I am inspired and reminded of what is important in my life as I sit at my desk and read it each day:

In the end what matters most is

How well did you live? How well did you love?

How well did you learn to let go?

- Make the work space one that helps lift tired spirits—include plants and flowers, as well as precious objects that are meaningful to staff and children.
- Display posters and natural objects from the environment (shells, leaves, pine cones, etc.) that remind us of the restful and healing power of nature.
- Use fragrant oils in oil burners or sprays to heal the body, lift emotions and relieve tensions (Nagy, 1995).
- Hang wind chimes and mobiles. Wind chimes invite the 'spirit of the wind' into our surroundings.
- Play relaxing music and find ways to reduce invasive or stress-producing noise such as the radio, appliances or overly-loud voices.

Reduce stress by checking the following in your work and home environments:

- Air quality (smoking, air conditioning, heating, pollution, solvents, excess humidity or dryness). Open windows for fresh air or use an ioniser.
- Lighting (bad lighting can produce eye strain and fluorescent lighting can be tiring). Try to spend some time in the fresh air and sunshine each day (wear a hat outside).
- Noise (high levels of background noise can cause irritability and tension headaches). Use meeting rooms separate from the main work area, try to go to a quiet area for office work where concentration is needed, play ambient, relaxing music to reduce background noise.
- Ergonomics (poorly designed furniture or bad use of good furniture can cause muscle tension and pain, e.g. backache). Take short breaks and do some simple stretching or moving to relieve strain.



Breathing techniques

Relaxation research (Farhi, 1996) shows that breathing techniques are the most readily accessible resource we have for creating and sustaining our vital energy.

Good posture is important in breathing and relaxation exercises. When standing, ensure the stance is comfortable, the head and neck are in alignment, and the shoulders are relaxed. When sitting, have the body as fully supported by the chair as possible. Ensure legs are uncrossed and feet are flat on the floor. Rest arms gently in the lap. Soften the shoulders, keeping them back, align the spine, neck and head (imagine a string is gently pulling the head upwards). Tuck the chin in and keep it level.

When in a lying position, use a yoga mat or a blanket. Keep legs slightly apart with the feet rolled outwards. Rest the arms slightly away from the body. Keep the body straight and the head in alignment with the body. Keep the head straight and tuck the chin under slightly.

Close the eyes; notice which muscles are tight and pay particular attention to these when practising your relaxation. Always roll onto your side before getting up off the floor after a relaxation session.

To breathe is our most natural instinct, but many of us have forgotten how to do it properly. The way we breathe—shallowly or deeply, smoothly or sharply—is a barometer for our physical and emotional state, and one of the first indicators of whether or not we are suffering from stress (George, 1998). When we want the body to relax, it is preferable to allow the abdomen to rise as we inhale and to contract slightly when we exhale. Practising this breathing technique will benefit the mind, body and spirit, with long-lasting effects on our health.

The benefits of correct breathing practice (or diaphragmatic breathing) include:

- oxygenation of the blood
- relief of anxieties
- allowing the voice its full range of expression
- blood being sent to the brain, enabling clear thinking
- alleviation of minor physical aches and tensions
- an increase in the immune system's functioning
- lowering of blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Exercise

Incorporating breathing techniques and gentle exercise into our daily routine paves the way for holistic stress management (Khor, 1993; Chuen, 1999). Simple exercise practised for at least 20 minutes, three times a week, relaxes our bodies and our minds. Exercise helps to 'burn off' stress chemicals that can accumulate in our bodies. Remember that, before the mind can relax, the body must learn to relax.

Do this through one or more of the following:

- breathing
- Tai Chi or Qi Gong
- yoga
- Pilates
- walking
- swimming
- gardening
- aqua aerobics
- tennis
- golf
- bowling
- dancing
- ensuring regular breaks throughout the day for walking, stretching and moving around in a relaxed way.

Relaxation

Relaxation is much more than 'chilling out' in front of the television. Relaxation techniques involve making a conscious effort to use the breath to calm the body and the mind (Graham, 1996). Develop a relaxation program in your centre/school. Not only will it help the children; it will also provide staff with opportunities to manage their stress levels at work. Plan a daily relaxation session including breathing, gentle exercise and relaxation based on the following ideas:

'Simple exercise practised for at least 20 minutes, three times a week, relaxes our bodies and our minds.'

- Progressive relaxation (using correct breathing, relax each of the body parts in turn).
- Tense/release relaxation (using correct breathing and tensing and releasing body parts in turn).
- Visualisation (with or without music, imagining a peaceful scene from nature or the achievement of a goal).
- Meditation, prayer or reflection (connecting to intuition and inner creativity through regular practices that still the mind). Many people who follow a faith already take time out to pray and reflect. People do not need to follow a religion to experience the benefits of meditation and reflection.
- Autogenic training is a simple, powerful and effective method of mental relaxation which leads the body's physiology and inner workings towards normalisation and healing. This form of relaxation is best learned from a qualified trainer.

Provide a spiritual and sacred space at home and set a time for daily relaxation for yourself. Spending time alone surrounded by objects that enhance the atmosphere of calm (candles, flowers, incense, quiet music) helps us 'nourish ourselves' and 'fill the well' before it becomes too depleted.



Personal empowerment practices

The seeds of success in stress management are sown by your approach and your attitude. The following personal empowerment practices will provide further creative techniques to bring relaxation and peace into your life and help you achieve your goals.

Positive affirmations (making positive statements to help achieve goals). An affirmation is a series of positively stated words affirming your health, strength and wisdom. The affirmation is repeated again and again in a relaxed and calm state. Affirmations enable us to transform negative thinking habits into positive ones. For example:

'I am now able to release all tension and breathe calm into my life.'

'My energies, abilities and confidence are ever-increasing.'

Keep a journal. Many early childhood practitioners use reflective practice as a daily tool to evaluate and improve their teaching. The simple act of putting pen to paper can work wonders with tension blocks, anxiety attacks, problem-solving and other forms of stress.

Some of the benefits of journal writing are mental clarity, objectivity, knowledge, insight, awareness, understanding, perspective and proportion (Cameron, 1993).

Hydrate. Drinking clean, purified water enhances the way our bodies cope with stress. Lethargy and fatigue often result from too little water consumption. When the recommended amount of water is consumed daily (six to eight glasses), health problems such as headaches can be alleviated.

Adopt a healthy, balanced diet. Nutrition Australia (2003) encourages us to eat a wide variety of nutritious foods by following the *Healthy eating pyramid*. When fresh vegetables, legumes and fruits; wholegrain cereals; lean meat and fish; milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives and plenty of water are consumed daily, and care is taken to limit fat, salt and sugars, we can maintain optimum health levels. Avoid resorting to 'convenience' junk food when experiencing stress.

Enjoy a therapeutic massage. Massage detoxifies and relaxes the body. Body toxins, e.g. harmful bacteria and viruses, are directed along the lymph system and into the lymph nodes for filtering and destruction, while the touch of a trained therapist provides healing and relaxes and soothes the body.

Use aromatherapy techniques. Aromatherapy is treatment using fragrances. Essential oils from plants, flowers and trees such as sandalwood, lavender and rosemary can be used in massage, baths or oil burners. Reward yourself at the end of a hard day by taking an aromatherapy bath, lighting candles and playing a relaxation CD.

Reward yourself. Provide special treats to keep motivated and enthusiastic, even when life becomes stressful. Meeting supportive friends in a café; seeing a movie; enjoying dinner in a restaurant; having a facial/manicure/pedicure; taking a drive in the country; joining a class such as belly-dancing or drumming; pursuing a hobby with friends (such as drawing, painting, scrapbooking); or other relaxing pursuits give some space and respite from your busy lifestyle.

Relaxation feels wonderful!

When practitioners and parents incorporate some of the above techniques into their daily working and home lives, they begin to feel more positive about themselves, their jobs, and the everyday challenges and opportunities that life presents.

Making positive changes can result in the following responses:

- calmness
- lightness
- self-worth
- wholeness
- wonder
- peace
- appreciation
- feeling privileged
- feeling 'elevated'
- empowerment
- tranquillity

These responses inspire energy, positivity and wellbeing. It makes good personal and professional sense to aim for quick, easy and healthy ways to manage stress.

Tips for crises and the unexpected in the early childhood day

More often than not, we tend to forget to use stress management strategies when we most need them.

When attempting to calm a child, diffuse disputes between children, redirect violent or 'out of control' behaviour, extinguish unacceptable responses such as spitting/biting/ kicking, or deal with upset and angry adults, remember the following:

- Calm yourself first by taking some deep breaths and visualise your way into a relaxed, calm and confident posture.
 - Affirm to yourself that the tension and upset will soon pass—you can and will work through this situation positively.
 - Use a calm and confident voice (achieve this through the breath and focus on remaining physically and emotionally balanced, rather than taking on the negative energies of others). Use assertiveness skills such as 'I-messages' and active listening to clarify the issue and state your response.
 - Reward yourself after challenging incidents by taking some time out so that you return to a balanced and relaxed state of mind.
 - Prepare yourself for future challenges by learning to use the technique of positive affirmations.
- (Thomas & Lockwood, 2003)

'More often than not, we tend to forget to use stress management strategies when we most need them.'



Breaks without breaking

The following simple ideas can be effective in providing quick, simple ways to restore calm and perspective to the day when time is short and the demands are many.

- **The relaxed breath:** Three rounds of a deep, slow and even (abdominal) breathing can help you to relax very quickly. Make each breath a little deeper and slower than the last. Remember to push the stomach out when inhaling. As you exhale, sense your whole body letting go.
- **Shoulder shrug:** As you inhale, clench your hands and tighten your shoulder and neck muscles. Hold the tension as you hold your breath. As you exhale, let go of the tension. Repeat this three or four times. By relaxing the neck and the shoulders you can bring relaxation to all parts of your body.
- **Feet flexing:** Sit down with legs outstretched. As you inhale, tense the muscles in your feet and flex the toes towards your body. Hold the tension as you hold your breath. As you exhale, let the tension go and feel the relaxation spread up your legs and through your whole body.
- **Tuning in to stillness:** When the stresses become too much, try to detach for a moment or two by focusing on stilling the body and the mind. You can save valuable energy by consciously teaching yourself to draw stillness into your whole being.
- **Splash!** Take a minute to splash your face with water, and then rub your face vigorously with a towel. It helps to clear and stimulate a tired mind.
- **Stretch:** Take a moment to stand upright with your hands resting by your sides. Inhale and raise your arms above your head, stretching as far as you can. Hold the stretch as you hold your breath, and then, as you exhale, let go of the tension and bend forward as if touching your toes. Hang in this position for a few seconds and then return to a standing position. Repeat a few times. Simple stretches help to reactivate the whole body.
- **A long, cool, glass of water:** Take a moment to drink a refreshing glass of water and empower this moment with a positive thought or an affirmation.
- **Listen to music:** When the sounds of loud voices and the cacophony of a busy room become too much to bear, try playing some relaxation, classical or ambient music. The effects of music on the body are real—positively affecting pulse, blood pressure, respiration, digestion, metabolism and healing (Joseph, 1998). Music can cleanse us, stimulate us and free us from feelings of stress.
- **Tired eye massage:** When you feel muscle strain behind the eyes, place either the pads of your fingers or the heel of your hands over both eyes and gently press for a few moments as you inhale and exhale deeply and slowly. Do this for about a minute and then gently open your eyes to the world again (Holden, 1992).

*It is important from time to time
to slow down, go away by yourself
and simply BE.*

(Eileen Caddy, in Hayward, 1984.)

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Is your stress affecting the quality of care you provide?

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Stress in early childhood: Helping children and their carers offers practical and effective strategies for stress management for both early childhood staff and the children in their care.

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ISBN 1-921162-00-7



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