



Information sheet:

Anticipating and responding to child stress

Children and young people can start acting out when there are other stresses in their lives. Reassuring the child or young person and providing extra care may help to get them through these stressful times. But if they don't feel better and their behaviour doesn't improve, seek professional help, particularly if the behaviour lasts many months or is severe.

If you know the children and young people in your centre or class well, it's sometimes possible to observe they may be frustrated, stressed, or anxious. Look for some of the signs mentioned below and get in early. Make a point of understanding particular stressors for children and young people with special education needs, such as certain types of noise, changes in routines, pain, or discomfort.

Remember, children and young people can express feelings outwardly or internalise them. Pay attention to unusually quiet behaviour as well as 'loud' exhibitions of behaviour.

Observe

Look for signs that things may not be quite right:

- increase in movement and noise
- talking faster and louder
- irritability or being overly emotional
- not complying
- head down, quiet, and overly compliant
- withdrawing socially and avoiding eye contact
- toileting or eating concerns
- headaches or stomach aches
- smiling and laughing inappropriately
- not concentrating
- unexplained fears or increased anxiety (can take the form of clinging)
- experimenting with drugs/alcohol
- falling marks.

Get to know a child

By getting to know a child or young person well, it is possible to gauge what is more likely to trigger challenging behaviour. Triggers can include:

- any form of change
- changes in routine – for example, sports days, end-of-year activities, outings, teacher absence, or parent absence
- illness, discomfort, pain, anger, lack of sleep, sensory difficulties, such as intolerance to noise
- things going on at home
- rushing
- difficulty understanding instructions or tasks
- fear and embarrassment, including being reprimanded in front of others
- particular social interactions, such as group work or taking turns.

Act/respond

- Prevent and avoid situations you observe cause stress.
- Make time to listen to and talk with a child or young person.



- Communicate between home and school/early childhood centre so people can be warned if a child or young person is showing signs of stress.
- Be more watchful and supportive of the child or young person and help them to feel more secure.
- Show the child or young person that you care and that you believe in them.
- Facilitate them to become involved with peers, if appropriate.
- Work with them to develop problem-solving and coping skills.
- Maintain a consistent but flexible routine.
- Teach coping strategies such as organising time and materials, relaxing or breathing, positive scripts.
- Heap positive praise upon them and reinforce positive efforts.

When behaviour escalates

If a child or young person becomes more agitated, show patience and give them your guidance and direction to increase their sense of security. Ensure your language is concise and short.

- Calmly and clearly tell them what to do (avoid arguing with them).
- Where possible and appropriate give them a choice, then some time to respond.
- If necessary, redirect them to another activity, move them to another space or remove them from the activity or room to calm down according to your school's or centre's policies.

Managing physical aggression

- Safety comes first and the goal is to defuse the situation. You also need to assist rather than punish the child or young person. Punishing a child or young person can escalate a situation.
- If the child or young person has a Safety Plan or Individual Behaviour Plan, follow the processes outlined in this plan.
- If there is no plan, follow your school's or centre's policies.
- Stay calm, protect other children, set limits and seek help.
- Remove the child or young person to another space or another room or remove others from the area. Ask for the child's cooperation to do this, for example, "Come to the library corner until things have settled".
- If there is a pattern to aggression you could take some preliminary actions such as children having their shoes off inside if the child kicks or making sure their fingernails are cut short if they scratch.
- Avoid practices that emotionally or physically harm a child or young person. They are likely to increase extreme reactions and are not helpful. Approaches that aim to teach social skills and reinforce positive behaviours, combined with planned incentives will always be more effective.
- Contact your local Ministry of Education office for advice on safe escorting and restraint.

Reducing tension

After an incident:

- Sit down and talk with the child or young person.
- Give them an opportunity to give their version of events. Even if you don't think their version is correct, listen in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way, without lecturing.
- Avoid arguing with the child or young person but remind them of the behaviour expectations and consequences and help them to plan an alternative approach if they feel that way again.
- Talk with other staff and plan to manage future incidents.



Other useful information

See the information sheet on common responses recommended and not recommended

Try The Good Behaviour Game

Tip

Look at what you can do to make your classroom or centre a stimulating, supportive, and well-managed learning space where positive behaviour can thrive.

- Build caring relationships with children and young people. Respect what each one brings to the class or centre (from home, their culture, and peers). Allow the experiences of the child or young person to be recognised in the classroom or centre.
- Have high expectations of all children and young people (be sure they are achievable).
- He moana pupuke ka ekengia e te waka – a choppy sea can be navigated. Have belief and faith that children and young people can grow and learn new strategies and behaviour.
- Be flexible, adjust the programme, and use a range of learning strategies.
- Use a range of interactions – instruction, monitoring, coaching, recognition, feedback, feed-forward, and individual and group interactions.
- Anticipate issues, plan, and improvise.

Caution: There are no quick fixes. Single, unplanned interventions on their own may not be effective. You also need to:

- understand the purpose of the behaviour (for example, to avoid or obtain)
- address the events that contribute to the behaviour
- identify whether you need to teach new behaviours or positively reinforce what a child or young person already knows
- identify whether you need to make changes to the environment around a child or young person
- decide how you will discourage unwanted behaviours
- provide extra helpings of rewards, encouragement, and praise for positive behaviour
- experiment – it will take time and numerous adjustments to get it right for a child or young person.