

KID CONNECTS WEEKLY NEWSLETTER: TRANSITIONING BACK TO CARE FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Issue 2: May 4th, 2020

FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:

Contact our warm line at, (303) 245-4418, to talk directly to an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant.



Hello parents and caregivers! We hope that this newsletter finds you healthy and well. Kid Connects is a program with Mental Health Partners. We provide early childhood mental health consultation to childcare centers in Boulder and Broomfield counties. Early childhood mental health consultants work to support the social-emotional development of young children. One way we support the mental health of young children is by supporting their caregivers in developing skills. We are here to offer practical strategies, tools, and tips through this every other week e-newsletter. This week, our newsletter focuses on information and techniques for how to support children as they transition back into a childcare setting. If you have a question, have a request for a newsletter topic, or wish to unsubscribe, please reach out to our warm line (303)245-4418 or email the Kid Connects' supervisor, Beth Garrett-Myers, at bgarrett@mhpcolorado.org

Stress and Child Development

Stress! It seems we all may be feeling a little bit more stressed these days. Although we do our best to protect them, even young children experience stress. They may be feeling scared by COVID-19, worried about the wellbeing of their family, or anxious as they try to respond to what may feel like an ever-changing and unpredictable world.

Not all stress is the same. It is important to distinguish the types of stress as each has a different impact on the brain. The three types of stress are positive, tolerable and toxic.

Positive Stress: Brief period of stress characterized by increased heart rate and slight elevation of the stress hormones. Positive stress is normal and a part of everyday life, it motivates use for action, Examples of positive stress include: the first day of school, a deadline or meeting a new person.

Tolerable Stress: More prolonged activation of the stress system in response to a more severe stressor, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of a loved one, divorce, or illness. What makes this stress tolerable is **the stress response is buffered by the presence of a supportive relationship, meaning that there is no long-term impact on the brain.**

Toxic Stress: Strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity in which the child does not have a caring and responsive adult to reduce the impact of stress. Toxic stress leads to alterations in brain architecture that can have negative life-long implications.¹

Don't stress about stress! Here are some ways to help you recognize the signs of stress and strategies to help your child manage stress. And remember, the most significant protective factor in your child's life is you! Being a warm, responsive, attuned and empathetic caregiver shields your child's brain from adversity so that it can grow and thrive.



¹ The Center for the Developing Child. (2020). Key Concepts: Toxic Stress. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

Common Behaviors Children Have in Response to Feeling Stress

Children respond to stress with a range of behaviors, both obvious (e.g. increased irritability, easily upset, etc.) and sometimes less clear behaviors (e.g. withdrawing, less active etc.) Children may also experience regression and changes in their sleep and eating patterns. Some of the behaviors you can expect to see include:



Separation Anxiety: excessive worry and fear about being separate from attachment figures causing difficulty saying goodbye/tantrums when faced with separation from parent/guardian and/or increase in clinginess

Attention Seeking (Connection Seeking): disruptive outbursts, tantrums, teasing, throwing things

Aggression: hitting, kicking, causing harm to others or self

Withdrawing: timid, anxious, fearful, quiet and/or having a flat affect

Regressive Reactions²: Thumb sucking, fear of the dark, fear of animals, fear of strangers

Physiological Reactions: Changes or loss of appetite, bowel/bladder problems, stomachache/headache, sleep disruptions

Creating Ongoing Narratives for Children

“Life is a journey, not a destination.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

This quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson is especially relevant now as we face the uncertainty of COVID. With ever evolving news and guidelines we are frequently having to adjust to the changing landscape of our lives. It is important to communicate these changes with children. One helpful way to help children understand is by creating a narrative. Narratives, or stories, are effective ways to help children anticipate what to expect. As our lives change daily and weekly, we need to continually revise and expand on the narratives we tell our children, keeping in mind we are shaping an ongoing story.



Why Narratives are Helpful: Narratives are beneficial for young children, even those who are not yet talking. We have two sides to our brain, the right and the left, that function very differently. The right side of our brain specializes in emotions, images and personal memories. The right side of the brain communicates by sending and receiving nonverbal communication such as eye contact, body posture and tone of voice. The left brain is logical, linear, literal and linguistical. It likes facts, words and order. Children, especially children under the age of 3, are right brain dominated. When children become upset, they become even more right-brain dominated. Storytelling or narration help bring together the right and left side of the brain.³ Storytelling helps children understand what is happening and what will happen next, increasing their sense of feeling safe and decreasing anxious feelings. More importantly, it is an opportunity for you and your child to connect.

What to Include in your Narrative:

1. An Explanation e.g. “We stayed home for a long time to help protect people from the strong virus, COVID.”
2. Name the changes/responses: e.g. “This week it is safe for you to go back to school/childcare. Some things will be different at school to help keep everyone healthy. For example, your teachers will wear masks like we do when we take a walk.”

² National Center for Disaster Preparedness. (2015). Common Stress reactions experienced by children (1-19 years) after a disaster and coping strategies to use during their time of trauma. Retrieved from <
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>>

³ Siegel, D. J. & Bryson, T.A. (2012). The whole-brain child. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks

3. Name the emotions: e.g. “You may be having big feelings about going back to school. It looks like you are worried.”
4. Provide reassurance: e.g. “Your teachers are doing things like wearing masks to keep everyone safe.”
5. Name what the child can do to stay healthy: e.g. “Like you have been doing at home, at school you can wash your hands a lot to stay healthy.”
6. Name what a child can still do/ what remains the same: e.g. “You will still be in the same classroom and I will pick you up every day and we will eat dinner together.”
7. Offer support and skills: e.g. “If you become upset at school, you can talk to your teacher, take a deep breath, or look at a book.”

Tips for Communicating with Teachers to Help Ease the Transition Back into Care

Due to COVID-19 and current public health recommendations, drop off and pick up procedures will most likely be different from how they were prior to the pandemic. However, it is important to remain in communication with your child’s provider and to have a plan to support an effective transition back to daycare/school. Here are a few helpful tips:

Come up with a plan: What will communication look like? Does the provider have a school email address? A phone number that you can call or text them on? Could you possibly send a notebook back and forth?

Set Expectations: Are you expecting a daily check-in? A weekly overview? Communication from the provider only if an issue arises? It is important to be clear with care providers about what kind of communication you are hoping to see AND asking them what they can accommodate.

Be Prepared for check-in: It is likely that providers are going to have a small amount of time dedicated to check-ins, so being prepared with questions to ask will be helpful. Things to update the care provider from your end might include:

- Eating Habits
- Periods of Dysregulation
- Current routine
- Sleep and nap schedule
- Medical needs

Additional areas to check-in about:

- Behaviors that you are seeing at home or asking if care provider has noticed any new behaviors
- General overview on how the week went
- How did she/he do with drop offs this week
- Was my child engaged with other children throughout the day/week
- How was my child’s mood throughout the day/week? How did transitions go
- Did my child share any feelings with you? Were there any red flags, like mentioning feelings of worry, anger, confusion, sadness?
- Is there anything parents can do to aid in predictability or consistency in routines?

Lastly, leave time for the teacher to ask YOU any questions they might have regarding your child.

Extend Empathy: Know that with any change or transition there will be ups and downs. It is likely that providers are experiencing complex emotions themselves returning to work.



