

# Pre-K Teach & Play Practice Point

## Early Childhood Stressors

Based upon the work of [Stewart Shanker and the Mehrit Center](#): *Five Primary Domains of Stress*, Harvard University's [Center on the Developing Child](#), and [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

Common Early Childhood Stressors (things that trigger arousal within the child):

- Social situations in general because children need to use energy to co-regulate, share, interpret, and make predictions about others. In particular, stress occurs when a child needs to “map” what others are thinking and/or feeling based upon what they say, how they act, facial expressions, tone of voice, and their body language. This is sometimes referred to as mindreading.
- Time spent in environments with unresponsive adults and/or in settings that are overcrowded (large ratios of children to adults).
- When children receive inadequate nutrition, insufficient opportunities for sleep, and/or have few opportunities to experience calm.
- Exposure to noises/smells/visual stimuli in which the child’s body must use energy to take in information and use the information to take an action. Stress can occur throughout the process, from the input of the message, to being able to regulate long enough to consider an action, to controlling impulses, to motor planning. Some children will become overwhelmed by sensory input because they have difficulty integrating the information from their senses within their nervous system (detecting and/or organizing the information).
- Adult-child interactions that leave the child feeling disconnected (can be a result of an over-use of technology), being exposed to harsh adult-child interactions, not receiving predictable and sufficient support from caregivers, and/or being exposed to their stress (e.g., their strong emotions or strong emotional reactions).
- Living in overcrowded or substandard housing, exposure to drug and alcohol, and/or being cared for by someone suffering from depression.
- Exposure to events that threaten their safety and/or events that threaten the safety of their parents/caregivers. For example, separation from parent/caregiver, exposure to violence, family turmoil, physical or sexual abuse/maltreatment, domestic violence, natural disasters, accidents, death of a family member, deployment or long absences of a caregiver, and/or painful medical procedures.

Alphabetical list of early childhood stressors that can often be reduced through classroom design and instruction:

- Confusion (when things are unpredictable, inconsistent, unclear) and/or overly demanding situations (forced choices and on-demand starts/stops)
- Difficulty with sensory-motor skills (e.g., knowing where our bodies are in space, crossing midline, balance, centering/coordination)
- Directions and corrections
- Experiencing intense emotions (self and others)
- Exposure to violence (e.g., fights between children, aggressive peer models, violent games/TV shows)
- Lack of adequate sleep/rest (children 3-5 yrs. need 10-13 hours of sleep including naps)
- Lack of opportunities for movement and choice
- Large group activities (overcrowded, less personalized, less responsive)
- Mindreading (need to use cues like facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language to read the minds of others – to understand that people have minds of their own and have thoughts different from theirs)
- Overuse/reliance on technology (limited physical movement and high amounts of sensory stimuli) and/or a “replacement” for connecting with caregivers and peers
- Poor nutrition and poor hydration
- Sensory overload (visual or auditory clutter)
- Unpredictable situations
- Unresponsive adults

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