

# Adapt the Environment to Meet Differing Emotional Needs

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At some time as a preschool teacher, you are likely to work with one or more children experiencing high levels of stress. A child's family might live in a homeless shelter, or one or both parents may be away from home on military deployment. Perhaps a child or adult in the family has a serious illness or suffers from depression. Children who are affected by significant, long-term, unrelenting stressors, may act out or use challenging behaviors. They need caring, thoughtful teachers who provide plenty of emotional support and a program tailored to meet everyone's needs.

One way to tailor the program is to adapt the classroom environment. Most preschoolers thrive in a classroom that is stocked with a variety of engaging materials and filled with choices. Children who are experiencing high levels of stress, however, may find such a classroom overwhelming. They have a greater need for a safe, predictable, and consistent setting. How can preschool teachers support children who need "less" and children who need a variety of challenging materials and activities? Here are some suggestions.

**Create several personal spaces where children can spend time alone for a while.** Most preschoolers need to take a break from the group from time to time. Some children who are highly stressed live in crowded homes where there are few spaces or opportunities to be alone. They may need more opportunities to withdraw from the group, regain control of their emotions and actions, and begin to develop self-regulation skills.

Personal spaces can take many forms—a large cardboard box, a pile of soft pillows in a corner, a small desk with room for only one child, a sheet draped over three sides of a table. These spaces can be permanent or set up as the need arises.

**Offer plenty of space for indoor and outdoor movement activities.** All children benefit from movement, but some children have limited opportunities to move and exercise their bodies. Active play releases tension, enhances self-esteem, and promotes physical development.

Follow a schedule that allows children to play outdoors twice a day. When the weather is just too hot, cold, or wet, set up games and movement activities indoors. Classes might take turns using the hallways for trike-riding, bowling, tossing bean bags in baskets, marching, or playing relay games.

**Focus on feelings.** Children may have feelings about what is going on in their lives that they cannot express through words. Classrooms that serve children who are affected by high levels of stress need plenty of outlets for self-expression.

Offer music and movement activities that focus on feelings; children can walk in an angry way, tiptoe in a shy way, jump in an excited way, or move to the music in whatever way they feel at the moment.

Paper for tearing, playdough, finger paints, puppets, musical instruments, and movement props such as scarves can all be vehicles for self-expression. In addition, include a variety of children's books that address real-life situations and feelings.

**Provide materials that allow children to make simple, but limited, choices.** While many preschoolers are used to choosing from a wide variety of toys and materials, some children have not had such opportunities and may not know how to make choices or use the materials typically found in preschool classrooms. Classrooms in which one or several children are highly stressed need to include both limited and varied choices. Here are a few examples of ways to adapt interest areas.

**Math and manipulatives area:** On one shelving unit, include several containers, each filled with a different kind of manipulative material. On another shelving unit, display several baskets full of large size Legos.

**Water and sand play:** Set up one or two individual dishpans of water with a few bottles or cups for children who find group play at the water table too chal-

lenging. Similarly, provide individual flat containers of sand with large bottle caps near the sand play area. Aluminum roasting pans work well for this. Some children are soothed by repetitive play experiences such as scooping, pouring, and rescoping the sand.

**Art area:** Provide several colors of paint at some easels; at one or two, offer only two colors of paint. Let children know that additional colors are available.

**Literacy area:** Divide the book collection. Display books with words and detailed illustrations in one section. Include board books, wordless picture books, and books with only a few words and simple illustrations in another.

**Dramatic play area:** Offer a few props (phones, cups and dishes, tote

bags) relevant to most children's experiences. Place clear containers filled with materials to expand play on shelves within children's reach. Children can choose what they want to use in their play.

One final reminder when considering the needs of preschoolers—keep some elements of the classroom consistent from day to day. All preschoolers need some consistency. Children who are highly stressed need even more. An environment that is generally the same today as it was yesterday helps them feel in control, safe, and nurtured. As teachers, you are an important part of that consistency. Your presence alone can make a huge difference in helping all children feel secure at the program.

**Editor's note:** These examples are adapted from *Responding to Children Under Stress: A Skill-Based Training Guide for Classroom Teams*, a 1994 booklet from the Head Start Bureau. Although written more than 15 years ago, these are still effective strategies for meeting the social and emotional needs of young children who live in settings with multiple stressors.

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