



The stress response in a nutshell

And why children react to stress in different ways

Question: Do you have children in your class that seem to lose the plot really quickly? Their temper goes from calm to 'The Hulk' seemingly instantly? Often there is no obvious trigger for this behaviour, and sometimes they can stay in that stressed state for such a long time. Most are difficult to help calm down.

If this sounds familiar, one of the things you will definitely want to begin to understand is the 'Stress Response'. Understanding how the stress response gets activated, what keeps it activated, and how to de-activate it, may well be the most informative thing you learn. It underlies almost every theory of behaviour and learning. It will make sense to you for working with children in your class, but also for us in our relationships, in work environments and with our own kids. Would you like to know more? Good, then read on.....

Before I begin my nutshell explanation though, please let me caution you that this is a very brief article. Full understanding of the stress response and how we can help children get better at calming down will need a lot more exploration. Feel free to use the resources in this magazine, and links to my website if you want further information.

One really important fact to understand about our brain is that the primary objective for the brain is survival. It is therefore, highly focussed on recognising and responding instantly when survival is threatened. Activating the stress response will activate the Flight, Fight or Freeze response. Our heart rate increases, we become more able to lift heavy things, fight off the threat etc (individual physical reactions are hugely diverse). This is fantastic for when there is truly a threat in our environment. It is certainly reassuring to know that our brain will activate the stress response when there is something in our environment that is likely to harm us.

The catch here is that although our brain is brilliant at ensuring survival through activation of this stress response, what it is not so good at is differentiating between a risk that could harm us, and a risk that is simply making us nervous, sad, scared, annoyed etc. So it may be a case of a door slamming, another child getting too close, or being asked to finish their work in five minutes. The brain reacts to these situations the same way it would react if it saw a lion coming. There is a risk in the environment, so the brain kicks off the stress response, igniting flight, fight or freeze behaviours, to increase the likelihood of surviving that risk. This is why the child may scream, hit, run or hide when they can't find the red crayon they need to complete their flower picture.


Now not all children will fight, flee or freeze when small risks are introduced into their environment. The reason why some children react more actively than others is a combination of genetics and environment. The simple way to explain it is to understand



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that learning to get stressed happens the same way we learn to do anything. The more times we practice, the more efficient the brain gets at activating that behaviour. We know this when we teach mathematics, spelling etc. It is the same thing when we learn to get stressed. Those children who have, for whatever reason, become stressed more often, and not had the advantage of a supportive adult around them to help calm down, can have a brain that activates the stress response much more efficiently. Therefore, it just takes an incredibly small risk to enter their environment to ignite the stress response.

This helps explain why some children react to stress differently to others. They have learnt to react more efficiently to stress. However, the bigger question is “What we can do to help them?” To answer this, I will have to use an even smaller nutshell, to summarise an even larger nut.

Basically, to get better at staying calm, we need to practice staying calm. This means we need to introduce our children to small levels of stress, and then support them to calm down. We then slowly increase that level of stress in a manageable way, ensuring this always happens in the presence of a supportive, attuned adult. There is obviously so much more to this answer. The process of learning to stay calm takes a long time and a high level of consideration. If we can help our children learn to be calmer, we are doing so much for them; not only for their learning, but also for their engagement in the world that continues to happen around them. 

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Kathryn is an expert in using neuroscience and physiology to assist us to better regulate ourselves. She is committed to helping teachers and parents to work better with children, youth, colleagues and clients. Kathryn runs sessions around this subject, supporting teachers to understand different ways to assist children to get better at staying calm. www.KBKonsulting.co.nz