

Te Rū Tamariki

A Study of Juniors Settling into School and Learning

Report for Parents, 2014-2015

In our study we are looking at how children cope with stress in their daily lives, especially during their time at school.

To date, our study has shown that while some children are more resistant to stress, other children are sensitive to changes in their surroundings and find it difficult to cope with stress. This sensitivity to stress is likely to be caused by the children's exposure to many unsettling earthquakes before they were four years of age.

We have found an increase in the number of children who have difficulty feeling settled in the classroom, compared to our pre-earthquake study, which is probably due to their earthquake related experiences. This means that some children might be irritable at school and feel nervous or tense and as a result, they may have difficulty in controlling their temper and expressing themselves in a positive and pro-social way. This stress reaction might also be getting in the way of their learning. They are not behaving this way on purpose. These children are sensitive to stress and it is more difficult for them to develop positive coping strategies.

Stress in children

Stress in daily life is a normal part of every child's experiences and there is no way to avoid it completely. For example, forgetting homework, losing a sunhat and struggling to learn to read all represent some common stressors that children may encounter in everyday life. In fact, manageable amounts of stress can sometimes help a child to become stronger and more resilient.

However, since the child's autonomic nervous system doesn't distinguish between daily stressors and life-threatening events, and since the child's stress system may have been made more sensitive to stress due to their past experiences, if the child is stressed over a broken pencil point at school, losing their sunhat, or the challenge of learning a new word during reading, their body can still react as if they were facing a life-or-death situation. This can make the child vulnerable developing positive mental and emotional regulation.

There are many ways that children learn to cope with stress – some of these are positive and can help a child grow and development, while some are negative

and can bring about behaviours that prevent a child from functioning in a way that supports their healthy development and learning.

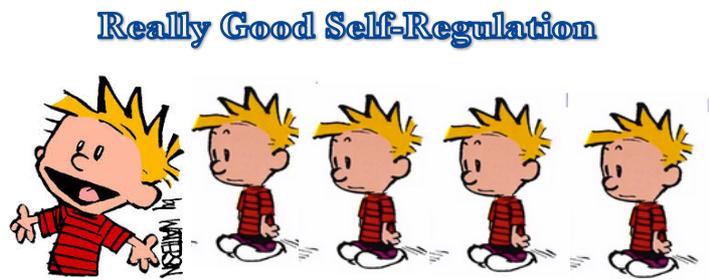
Most children have more than one coping strategy, and the ages of 5 to 10 are the time when coping styles start changing.

We have outlined four common ways that children cope with stress in this report and ways that you can help them learn to understand and cope better with stress.

Coping Style 1: Self-Regulation of Stress

The ability to control your own reactions to stressful situations is important for emotional-wellbeing.

It can take many years for children to master this strategy and even adults sometimes have difficulty controlling their own reactions.



1 in 5

Study Children have very good self-regulation

To develop self-regulation, children need to

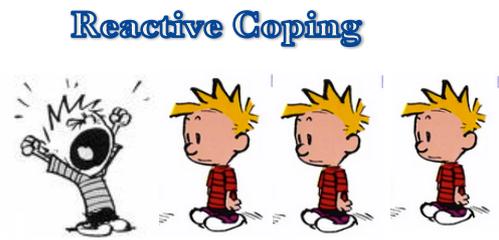
- understand what is going on in their minds and bodies, so that they can recognise when their body is responding to stress
- understand the emotions of others
- have the words they need to tell others about their feelings
- learn strategies to control their feelings
- be able to direct their behaviour toward a particular goal, such as following directions,
- being able to control their outside behaviour to recover from an upset

Once children have learnt some ways to self-regulate, they need to remember these strategies and put them in place at the right time. This can be difficult, particularly in the heat of the moment when children are upset or are sensitive to stress.

Coping Style 2: Automatic Reactive

Coping

When stress becomes 'too much' to handle or keep inside, we sometimes react to even small stressor events or daily hassles by emotionally venting or 'letting it all out'. In adults, this can be seen during episodes of 'road rage', where a person may yell or swear.



1 in 3 or 4
Study Children Use Reactive
Coping

Children who experienced the earthquakes may be very sensitive to stress. Even little things, which we wouldn't think of as very stressful, sensitive children can find to be very upsetting.

Stress-sensitive children can react to daily life stress and hassles by:

- ✚ Being irritable and moody
- ✚ Lashing out at others
- ✚ Screaming
- ✚ Having a meltdown
- ✚ Being aggressive
- ✚ Arguing back or being defiant

These types of behaviours usually happen when all other types of coping fail and stress has reached a high level. It is important to understand that the child does not consciously choose to behave in this way and their reactive coping strategy is an **automatic response**.

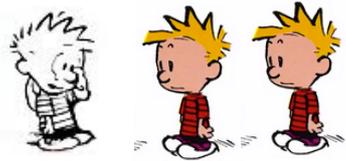
Our research shows that some children's nervous systems may be very sensitive to stress and increase the likelihood that they will respond in a reactive way.

Coping Style 3: Dependent Coping

This is a coping style that involves reacting to stress by trying to 'hold it all in'. This may result in children:

-  Crying
-  Whining
-  Clinging
-  Acting younger than their age

Dependent Coping



1 in 3

Study Children Use Dependent Coping

When primary age children are maxed out on stress they may use a dependent coping strategy as a way of asking for help from adults.

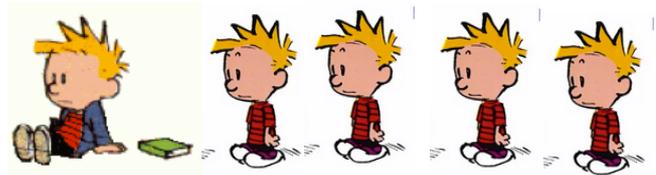
As children are sometimes not able to calm themselves down, crying, clinging or whining can be their way of getting an adult to help soothe and comfort them when things become too much. Providing support during this time is important as children often do not understand their feelings and may think there something wrong inside of them.

They are not doing this to get attention or to get out of doing something. They are not 'doing this on purpose'. Their bodies are reacting to feelings, memories, fear, noises, lights and other things differently to how your body reacts.

Coping Style 4: Becoming Quiet Like a Turtle

“Turtle” Withdrawal Coping

This is a coping style that involves reacting to stress by “withdrawing into yourself.”



This may result in children:

- ✚ Spending time alone
- ✚ Watching from the sidelines instead of joining in
- ✚ Needing more time to develop friendships

1 in 5

Study Children Use Withdrawal Coping

When primary age children are maxed out on stress they may use a “turtle” coping strategy as a way of moderating their reactions.

This is a more mature style of coping with stress. We believe it may be a step toward self-regulation, when children learn to think before they act, but, as this has not been studied in young children, we

As children do not always have the right words to describe how they are feeling, becoming quiet can be one way of dealing with their inner emotions.

In a busy, bustling classroom, where you are learning lots of new things, it may be difficult for some children to cope with all the new information, especially if they have some stress sensitivity from their early childhood earthquake experiences.

How to Help Children Learn Self-Regulation

1) Emotion Coaching

When a child is reacting to stress, they are not ready to learn. They need your support and understanding. Helping them to communicate what they are feeling inside is a good way to provide support. We’ve enclosed *Emotion-Coaching for Stress Sensitive Children* to help you get started.

Once children are able to recognise when they are stressed, they are more likely to learn self-regulating strategies and to recognise when other children may be stressed.

2) Getting enough GOOD sleep

If your child is sensitive to stress, one important step that you can take to help your child at school is to help improve their sleep. Children who are five years old need approximately 11-13 hours of sleep a night and children who are six or seven years old need approximately 9 to 11 hours of sleep. Children should be helped to sleep alone to help them learn to calm themselves in the night.



Children who are sensitive to stress are likely to sleep better if they do not have TV or screen time after dinner. Instead, colouring-in, looking at books or playing with toys, such as soft toys or blocks, will help them calm down before going to bed. We've enclosed a tip sheet to get started.

How to Help A Stressed Child Calm Down

When a child is reacting to stress, remember:

They are not doing this to get attention or to get out of doing something. They are not 'doing this on purpose'. Their bodies are reacting to feelings, memories, fear, noises, lights and other things differently to how your body reacts.

1. Stay calm yourself. You can be an excellent role model!
2. Give reassurance and affection. These are the first steps in helping your child calm down.
3. Explain to them what is going on: "You seem to be feeling stressed/frustrated/upset" (Use the coaching cards, too).
4. This helps them to put words to their feelings, as well as learn that other people can also feel.
5. Saying this in a soothing voice can help them to calm down.
6. Suggest a positive way to help calm down.

Reactive Coping

✚ Hold their hands and jump up and down as long as you can. Smile. Sing a song. Count to 10 yourself as you are jumping. If this ends in laughing and tickling, so much the better!

✚ Or, put on some happy music and dance 'till you both drop!

✚ These types of activities will help the body get rid of some of the toxic hormones that are released when a child is stressed.

✚ Most importantly, you being there will help the child feel safe and reassured.

Dependent Coping

- ✚ Sit with them and read them a story
- ✚ listen to quiet music
- ✚ sit with them while they colour in.
- ✚ Help them find a soft toy to cuddle while you cuddle them (they're not too old).
- ✚ They are needing your attention to cope. (Use emotion coaching when they are calm)

Withdrawal Coping

- ✚ Give them time to think.
- ✚ They are needing to be alone
- ✚ Follow their lead when they decide to join in

These Won't Work: How NOT to Help A Stressed Child Calm Down

The following reactions to child stress can make stress worse and behaviour more extreme:

- Punish, timeout or tell -off the child for their attempts to cope.
- Ignore the child or pretend its not happening.
- Pushing the child away or tell them to “stop being such a baby”.
- Make the child to join in or play with the other children/family when they don't want to.
- Asking the child to explain their behaviour, as they may not have the words to explain their feelings.
- Stressed children may not be able to understand what is happening in their bodies
- Tell the child to ‘get over it’.
- Say things like, “Its about time you came to the dinner table.”
- If there is frustration or anger in your tone or facial expression, the child may pick up on this and this could increase their stress. They may be afraid they will lose your love.

Children cannot learn self-regulation if they are stressed, punished, ashamed or bewildered.

Children who are stressed are not in a mental state for learning. If they knew how to control their stress, they would be doing it. No one likes to feel out of control.

About This Report

This report has been prepared by Kathleen Liberty, Lee Hooper and reviewed by Maureen Allan and .

If you have any questions, or would like more information, please email kathleen.liberty@canterbury.ac.nz or phone on 03 3642-545 or write to:

Kathleen Liberty
School of Health Sciences
College of Education, Health and Human Development/Te Rāngai Ako me te Hauora
PB 4800
University of Canterbury
Ilam



Kathleen



Lee



Maureen



Sonja


**KEEP
CALM
AND USE
COPING
SKILLS**