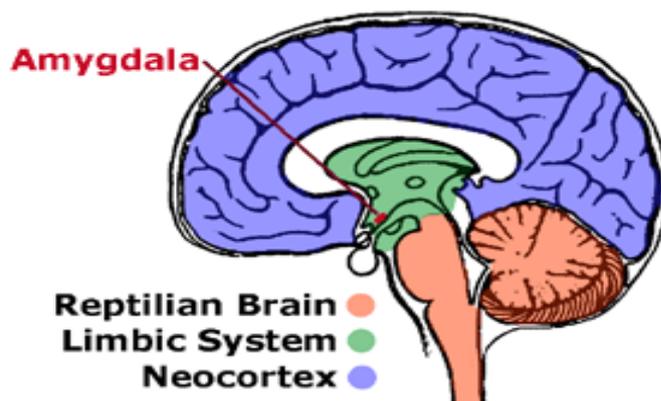


Factsheet 1

Supporting Your Child During a Stress Response

The Evolution-Designed Brain



Stress responses can be very frightening for your child and for you. As adults, the support that we offer to children when they are in a stress response is vital to help them reduce the frequency or stop regular stress responses. Underneath the stress response is fear. During their early childhood experiences, as a survival strategy your child will have quickly learnt that the world was unsafe and unpredictable. As a result, they learnt that to survive, they must stay on guard. This hypervigilant state can be triggered in the brain and body *even when* the child is placed in a safe, loving and caring environment.

There are several strategies that you can adopt to help prevent frequent stress responses, but re-shaping the brain takes time and repetition. This can be achieved through a range of methods such as massage, sensory activities, clear predictable boundaries and other interventions, described in the fact sheet 'Helping My Child Feel Safe'. However, when your child goes into a stress response this can be a very frightening time for them and there may be a host of behaviours that result from this.

Here Comes the Neuroscience!

As human beings our brains are hard-wired for survival. The brain has evolved over millions of years. The first part of the brain to grow is the early reptilian brain (the pink part of the diagram). This part of the brain relates to basic survival including fight, flight or freeze. The middle part of the brain is the limbic system (the green part of the diagram), this is the emotional, sensory and relational part of our brain. The final part of the brain to grow is the neocortex (the blue part of the diagram), this part of the brain is involved in reasoning, rationalising, thinking, planning and sequencing. The neocortex is not fully developed until approximately 18-20 years old.

What Happens in a Stress Response?

When we perceive a threat to life, the information shoots from the senses into the brain. Within the brain's limbic system is the amygdala. This works as a thermometer for risk. If the amygdala perceives a risk, within a split second, it will raise an alarm sending a danger message downwards through the reptilian brain. The reptilian brain will then leap into action, sending messages through the sympathetic nervous system, activating a stress response. This then sends a message down the nervous system to activate fight, flight or freeze.

Why is my child going into a stress response for no reason?

For children that have experienced trauma, threat or perceived threat will have triggered the brain into the stress response. Once this has happened, the amygdala will have become very sensitive and your child is then likely to perceive threat even when it is not present. In a stress response, the autonomic nervous system will place the body on alert, shooting a message down the central nervous system. This causes the body to release the stress hormone adrenaline. The thyroid gland automatically stimulates the metabolism causing the heart to beat faster, breathing to increase and extra strength in the body to take place through oxygen to the muscles ...the body is now in survival mode! If your child has experienced trauma it is often very difficult to spot what may have triggered the response, and importantly, your child may not know either.

In survival mode we either go into...

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Dissociation

How can I help when they are in the stress response?

The stress response bypasses the thinking cognitive part of your brain (cortex). Because of this, now is *not* a time for reasoning, consequences or punishment; you will be talking to a part of the brain that is not working at this time! Although it may not look as though your child is frightened, they are. As such, you need to respond to them like a frightened child, but also ensure your own safety as well as theirs in doing this.

Phase One: The Stress Reaction

- Stay calm, your child needs you to keep your thinking brain going whilst theirs is not working.
- Safety is the first priority for the child and for you. Stay in as close proximity as it is safe to do so. Your child will need supervision. Attempt to remove objects that can be thrown or your child can hurt themselves or you with.
- Offer repeated reassurance using the following mantra. '(Childs name) you are with (your name or role) I am with you and you are safe'. You may need to repeat this many times, in a firm but nurturing voice.
- Some children will allow you to touch them so gentle strokes or hugs can work. Repeat the above mantra or as they are calming down, repeat 'it is OK, you are safe'.
- For some children, entering their space may create a fight or flight response involving them running away or becoming violent. If this is the case, then do not get into their space unless it is to prevent harm. But stay as close as is safe to do so.
- If you make any actions, again briefly state what you are doing and that they are safe. For example; 'I am moving the table to keep you safe'.

Phase Two: Coming Out of a Stress Response

This process in itself can be very frightening as your child is likely to be dazed and confused afterwards. They are also likely to have little memory of what happened. Due to the body's physiological responses, your child may be very tired too.

- Continue to offer the mantra that they are safe, and it is OK.
- When they are calming, sensation will be activated before thought. You can bring them back into the present by offering a sensory stimulus, for example; 'Can you feel how bumpy the carpet is' or 'listen to the birds outside they are singing'.
- Children that do not let you touch them during the stress response may now let you hold or hug them, and this is an extremely important thing to do if they will let you.
- Take your time and go at their pace with re-entering the present here and now.
- Your child may need a milky drink and a snack, and time to make themselves comfortable.

Phase Three: Re-ground and Repair

Although it may not always feel like it, your child can *not* control the stress response when it is activated.

- Punishment is not the answer - You may however need to work on repair with your child. Firstly, do they have any hurts that need taking care of? Take time to plaster a cut or rub cream on a scratch. Repair may also include environmental repair, for example; 'we will need to put the ripped cushion in the bin and stick down the wallpaper'. This should *not* be done as punishment or to shame the child. Punishing does not work to prevent stress responses. Such actions should demonstrate basic cause-and-effect, which due to trauma may very well be under-developed. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate that together we can repair.

- It is important that you find time for your own repair. Being with a child during a stress response is extremely distressing and challenging and takes a lot of energy, understanding, persistence and love to deal with. Find time to de-brief with a family member or someone that is supportive. If you think you need further help then speak to your GP, social worker, community paediatrician or school. You do not have to deal with your child's trauma on your own.

Remember with support, time and repetition, the stress response can become less sensitive and enable your child to live in the present here-and-now, safe and loving environment that you have created for them.