



Early Childhood Stressors

Stress, as defined by Dr. Stuart Shanker, is anything "that requires us to **burn energy** to remain operating at our **functional best**." Anything from having to *regulate* our *temperature*, deal with *strong emotions*, to *remembering* a set of directions.

A state of **functional best** is when our brain/s registers that we are balanced or stable in our ability to regulate *temperature*, deal with *emotions*, and process *information* etc...that we are in a state of homeostasis. In other words, the brain registers that we are "safe" (i.e., no internal alarms are going off).

Our brains are constantly "*surveying the scene*" to keep our systems in a **state of homeostasis** (i.e., balanced and stable) and to determine if we are **safe**. The brain uses *current information*, *memories from past experiences*, and our own *temperament* to determine if we are "safe" and/or if it needs to **burn energy** to return to where we can function best.

For young children, because their brains are underdeveloped and often unable to take in information and correctly determine if they are "safe", they can become **hyper** or **hypo-aroused** by the stressors. This causes a shift from **social engagement** to *fight, flight, freeze, or faint* mode. The brain makes this shift to "help" the child's systems return to a state of what their brain registers as "safe, balanced, and stable. Children need us to help them **interpret** all the input to their brains and to help **recognize** and **reduce** stressors whenever possible.

The following pages include **examples of common early childhood stressors**. Not all can be prevented, and not all will have the same impact on a child at any given time or across children. However, being aware of what can be a stressor is the first step in reframing "*misbehavior*" as "*stress behavior*" and understanding that there are times when children are under **too much stress** and are unable to show us all they know and can do.

- BIOLOGICAL
- EMOTIONAL
- COGNITIVE
- SOCIAL
- PRO-SOCIAL



Biological Domain -- Stress on physiological systems (e.g., cardiovascular, digestive, nervous); It's where stress starts and is always a central factor ~ Stuart Shanker



Emotional Domain -- Stress caused by strong emotions (positive and negative) ~ Stuart Shanker



Cognitive Domain -- Stress caused from processing info; Mental processes involved in knowledge acquisition ~ Stuart Shanker



Social Domain -- Stress from having to understand what others are thinking and how own affect impacts others ~ Stuart Shanker



Prosocial Domain -- Stress that come from social engagement (social interactions with others) ~ Stuart Shanker

The examples of early childhood stressors, and the overview of the five domains of stress, were taken and/or adapted from articles, infographics, and videos created by Dr. Stuart Shanker <https://self-reg.ca>

Stressors Checklist

BIOLOGICAL DOMAIN (INTERNAL)



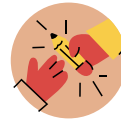
- Autoimmune diseases/illness /chronic infection
- Being too cold or too hot
- Chapped lips/hands
- Chronic pain
- Digestive disturbances or imbalances/Gastrointestinal issues
- Difficulty breathing (allergies, asthma)
- Eating sugar/candy
- Food intolerance/sensitivities
- Inadequate sleep/disturbed sleep (children 3-5 yrs. need 10-13 hrs. of sleep)
- Limited opportunities to move
- Poor nutrition and/or hydration
- Sore teeth
- Trouble hearing/seeing

NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:

Examples of stressors are based on work by Stuart Shaker <https://self-reg.ca>

Stressors Checklist

BIOLOGICAL DOMAIN (EXTERNAL)



Being inside too much/limited time outside and/or with nature

Bright lights, bright colors, busy walls/carpets

Clothing (sensitivity to fabrics)

Distractions (e.g., sparkly or dangling things, visually distracting clothes, movement while others are talking, things flashing and/or hanging from the ceiling, lots of different things going on, differing demands for attention)

Deep or light touch

Dry air

Fluorescent lighting/lack of natural light

Having to be too still

Humming from power lines, from lights, from electronics

Loud/harsh/disruptive noises (e.g., outside traffic, voices, TV, music, squeaky things, bells, alarms)

Proximity (too close) and/or difficult to move (too much stuff/too small of space)

Screen Time (limited movement paired with high sensory stimuli)

Smells (e.g., cigarette smoke, fumes, perfume, cleaning chemicals)

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Stressors Checklist

EMOTIONAL DOMAIN



Strong Emotions - Big Emotions

Negative or Challenging Feelings

- Disappointment
- Embarrassment
- Feeling hurt
- Feeling uncertain
- Feeling unwelcome
- Grief/Loss
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Isolation/Separation
- Lonely
- Overcrowded
- Sadness/Depression
- Worry

- Anticipation
- Build-up to an event or celebration
- Excitement
- Feeling responsible
- Love/Deep affection
- Surprise

Feeling Unsafe/Fear

- Anxiety
- Completing certain tasks that are challenging
- Fear of conflict, getting into trouble
- Fear of being made fun of, trying something new
- Fear of _____
- Nightmares
- Not feeling physically safe
- Participating in a large group
- Uncomfortable with how others are acting

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Stressors Checklist

EMOTIONAL DOMAIN CONTINUED



- ___ Being removed from a situation for disciplinary reasons (suspension - expulsion)
- ___ Changing routines/situations/expectations
- ___ Confusion
- ___ Overly demanding situations - lots of directions and corrections
- ___ Unclear/inconsistent expectations/messages
- ___ Unfamiliar routines/situations/expectations
- ___ Unpredictable routines/situations/expectations
- ___ Unpreferred routines/situations/expectations
- ___ Unsure what expressions/body language, tone of voice, phrases, and other environmental cues mean

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Stressors Checklist

COGNITIVE DOMAIN



- Boring tasks/activities/interactions - lack of stimulation
- Competition
- Confusion - unsure the meaning of things happening or said
- Difficult tasks that are not age appropriate
- Holding information in working memory
- Information overload (too quickly, too slowly)
- Learning a new language - engaged in situations with an unfamiliar language
- Limited opportunities for choice and to play
- Making decisions
- Multi-tasking
- New concepts/new learning opportunities
- Overstimulation
- Pattern recognition
- Processing disorder or difficulty
- Prioritizing tasks
- Recall - remembering information
- Symbolic representing
- Thinking - concentrating
- Time pressures
- Too many interruptions
- Lots of requirements to shift their attention on demand
- Lots of distractions (any sensory input)
- Too much inferring vs clearly stating expectations
- Under-stimulation

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Stressors Checklist

SOCIAL DOMAIN



- Adjusting to new norm
- Being a quiet person in a loud world
- Being/feeling excluded (pulled out, pulled over, pulled aside)
- Being bossed around or dominated by another - being bullied
- Being left out of a group/rejected
- Big groups - crowded classrooms/settings/spaces
- Confrontation
- Confusing social situations
- Constant social input (e.g., too much support, lots of reminders, directions, and corrections)
- Experiencing hostility
- Exposure to violence (including video games and violence on TV)
- Fitting into different cultural norms
- Intense one-on-one interaction
- Lack of friends or others to play with
- Lack of human interaction - Lack of social engagement
- Large group gatherings
- Learning the norms of a new group
- Not being understood by friends or acquaintances
- Over focus on detecting the social signals
- Reading in front of others
- Two or more people talking at the same time
- Unresponsive adults

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Stressors Checklist

PRO-SOCIAL DOMAIN



- Coping with other people's stress
- Dealing with others' strong emotions
- Difficulty reading others' cues
- Empathy
- Helping someone through their distress
- Injustice
- Interacting w/people/groups that don't really 'get you' or are quick to assume
- New neighborhood, classroom, caregiver/teacher
- Other people's discomfort
- Sad or sick friend/family member
- Sharing
- Sympathy
- Unfairness
- Understanding right from wrong
- Waiting your turn
- World events

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