

Babies and young children who are involved with the child welfare system often experience stress. Scary or traumatic events, separations from loved ones, big changes in their lives—all are hard for young children.

Stressful experiences may include:

- Being separated from important people
- Suddenly moving from one caregiver or home to another
- Not knowing what happened to brothers or sisters
- Seeing family members fight
- Not having enough to eat or a safe place to live
- Seeing adults under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Medical problems and painful or scary medical procedures
- Being hurt physically or emotionally
- Being sexually abused

Signs of Stress

Babies and young children show reactions to stress and trauma through their emotions and behavior. Signs of stress may look different at different ages.



Having a child or relative in the foster care system, or caring for a child who is in foster care, can also be very stressful. Stress also affects relationships between young children and their caregivers. Parents and caregivers need and deserve support to cope with stress.

Concerns in the following areas may be signs of stress:

Regulation

- Sleep or feeding problems
- Irritability or crying
- Hard to soothe
- Overly active

Handling big feelings

- Easily startled or scared
- Anger and temper tantrums
- Refusal to cooperate
- Aggressive behavior
- Withdrawn or unusually quiet
- Repeatedly playing about or talking about scary events

Relating to other people

- Showing less interest in other people
- Clingy or seeking lots of attention
- Confusion about appropriate boundaries

Differences in development

- Loss of skills that had already been learned
- Delays in development
- Acting younger than their age

Supporting Babies and Young Children Involved in the Child Welfare System

Experiencing stress at a young age puts a child's brain development and growth at risk. It can make day-to-day care challenging. There are things you can do to help babies and young children heal from past stress and cope with current stress.

Recommendations for parents and caregivers

Nurture

- Show you care by talking to, singing to, reading to and playing with babies or young children.
- Find activities that are soothing (e.g., bath time, reading books, listening to music).
- Babies and young children need physical touch. Hold, hug and show physical affection while following the child's cues to see what he or she likes.

Structure

- Create daily schedules and routines that are predictable.
- Use calendars to show children when they will have visits and calls.

Prepare and share

- Prepare children for transitions (e.g., talking about upcoming visits, attending court).
- Provide a favorite toy, blanket or other object for support during transitions.
- Communicate with other caregivers during exchanges (e.g., before and after visits) about a child's feeding, sleep and behavior. Communication can be verbal or in a written log.
- Talk to children about their feelings and experiences. Listen, acknowledge their feelings and describe their experiences.

Understand

- Remember that children experience stress, and try to understand what is being communicated by a child's behavior.
- Expect behavior changes before and after transitions. For example, behavior changes before or after visits with parents or family members are very common.
- Remember that this is a stressful time for everyone and everyone is doing the best they can.
- Support children's participation in therapy if recommended. For young children, therapy usually includes the caregivers. Ask the child's therapist how you can help support the therapy at home.

Self-care and reflection

- Take time out for yourself.
- Think about what you need and ask for help.
- Do your best to stay calm when a child is sad, angry, or having difficult behaviors.
- Remember that children are always watching and listening. Be a role model of good relationships and positive communication.

Support provided by the **Stein Tikun Olam Infant-Family Mental Health Initiative** and **First 5 LA**.

Tikun Olam Foundation of the
JEWISH COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES



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Giving kids the best start



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Recommendations for Professionals

Emotional Support

- Help parents, caregivers and other important adults in children's lives understand how trauma affects young children's emotions and behavior.
- If transitions in placement are necessary, help prepare the child by talking about the change in advance. Help provide continuity in the child's life story through pictures, objects and story books.
- Help caregivers and family members to understand each other's perspective and communicate respectfully with each other. Professionals can help biological family members and foster caregivers work together as a team. If reunification services are in place, help the current caregiver understand the importance of supporting the reunification process.
- Remember that most parents and caregivers are doing the best they can with the resources they have. Help parents and caregivers get the support they need.
- Professionals experience stress too. Take time to reflect with trusted colleagues about feelings and stresses.

Advocacy

- Advocate for ample time for visits with biological parents and family members to ensure that children develop and maintain relationships with biological families.
- The younger the child, the more frequent visits should be. Babies cannot hold onto memories and maintain attachments without regular contact.

Resource Linkage

Developmental services

- Closely monitor for delays in babies' and young children's social-emotional, communication, cognitive and motor development. Use standardized screening measures whenever possible.
- Refer for developmental assessments or services through the early intervention program, the school district and/or early childhood mental health programs.
- Provide support with linkage to early intervention and enriching programs and advocate to ensure that families are connected.

Mental health services

- Even young babies can benefit from infant mental health services. Therapy for babies focuses on attachment relationships and helps babies form healthy bonds and cope with stress.
- All significant adults involved in a baby's or young child's life should be involved in mental health services when possible. The best outcomes occur when all the people who care for and love the child are involved in treatment.
- If reunification services are in place, child-parent mental health services can support attachment and provide a reunifying parent with additional support and skills.

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