

the school years toolkit

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Calming

You have been directed to this Advice Sheet because you are concerned with the stress levels of a child or young person you may be working with.

If you have implemented these strategies and have not seen improvement after three months, please contact CYPIT.

Some children, for a number of reasons, can become highly anxious, stressed or have a heightened arousal or alertness. They may respond inappropriately or out of context to a particular event, stimulus or the environment, for example by hitting out at another pupil because they brushed past them or by running out of the classroom or shouting at an adult when asked to complete a task.

This can indicate that they have difficulties with processing and integrating sensory information. This inability to correctly process sensory information can result in a child going into Flight, Fight or Freeze responses to a stimulus. These reactions are beyond the child's control. They will be incapable of logical thought and reasoning until they have calmed down.

Children can become stressed and anxious for a variety of other reasons such as illness, difficulties at school, difficulties at home and poor peer relationships. No matter what the reason, once a child becomes stressed, over anxious or over alert they will not be able to concentrate on the task at hand and this will therefore hamper their learning.

What you may see

They may:

- Become very fidgety and not be able to keep still
- Become flushed in the face or go very pale
- Be hyper vigilant to what is going on around them
- Increase their vocalisations or suddenly become very quiet
- Act out in class or become very withdrawn
- Run away from a situation
- Show aggressive behaviour towards themselves and others
- Be unable to concentrate
- Refuse to cooperate

Section 5 **advice** sheets

- Cry
- Shake
- Show lack of eye contact.

Strategies and Advice

- Any deep/slow breathing exercises.
- Talking in a calm even tone.
- Listening to “calming” music or music that has a regular beat – not heavy metal / loud rock music! Listening through headphones can help to “shut out” other distractions.
- Having a “sports bottle” with water to drink from throughout the day/around the house, sucking thick fluids through a straw (eg yoghurt, thick shakes, smoothies) can have a calming and “organising” effect.
- Pushing against walls with their hands, shoulder, and back .
- Weight bearing activities eg activities on all fours/laying on their tummy and forearm propping. Board games can often be played this way.
- As with drinking through straws, this can be calming and organising.
- Rocking in a rocking chair.
- Swinging – encourage (but never force) the child to swing. Gentle linear movement is therapeutic.
- Blowing bubbles.
- “Push-pull” activities that involve deep muscle work, for example moving a wheelbarrow full of dirt, moving furniture or tug of war game.
- Running an “errand” so you have removed the child from a situation but given them the structure of a task.
- Giving the child an option to leave the situation or environment to go to a “safe place”.
- Carry a weighted back pack, (weight should be no more than five per cent of their body weight).
- Create a box of fidget toys that the child has chosen, eg elastic bands, blue tak, koosh ball, magnetics, and bean bags.
- Eat chewy foods eg dried fruit, winders, carrot, celery sticks.

Prepare a safe sensory place

- Behind a chair or couch.
- Inside a large box or under a table with a sheet over the top.
- Set up a non-lockable cupboard like a play closet with lots of pillows.
- Bean bag chairs/huge pillows.
- Inflatable chairs.
- “Koosh” balls for squishing/pulling.
- Dim the light switch.
- Have a quiet place.

Section 5 **advice** sheets

You will probably need to experiment with these ideas to see what suits the child best. Try out a few different things and see if they start asking for any of them in particular. You may find they begin to seek out the things they find calming and “organising” for themselves.