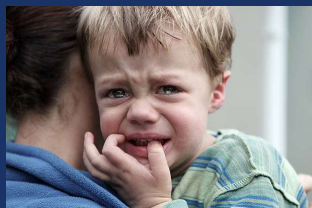


Engage – Calm – Distract
 Understanding and Responding to Children
 in Distress



*A Resource Kit for Children's Providers and Caregivers
 during disasters and Emergencies*

Engage-Calm-Distract
<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/engage-calm-distract>

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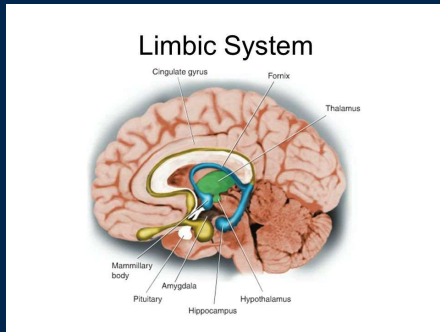
Pediatric Emotional Distress Reference System
 A Companion to:
Engage – Calm – Distract
 Understanding and Responding to Children in Distress

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Training Objectives

- Understand how fear impacts the brain
- Recognize common distress reactions in children
- Identify strategies and activities for engaging, calming and distracting children (and caregivers) in emotional distress

Fear and the Brain





Common Child Distress Reactions



Common Distress Reactions

3 – 6 Years (Preschool) 15 – 23 kg

Crying/screaming

Temper Tantrums

Aggression – hitting, biting, throwing things

Grabbing on/holding on to stationary objects to avoid being moved

Physical symptoms not directly related to current medical issues – stomach ache/headache

Wetting pants

Difficulty separating from caregiver

7 – 11 Years (School Age) 24 – 36 kg

Difficulty paying attention/easily distracted

Easily startled

Asking questions about the event/what you are doing/what things are

Physical complaints not directly related to medical condition (stomach ache/headache)

Difficulty with authority/following directions/being redirected

Easily angered/temper tantrums

Sad/crying

Screaming uncontrollably

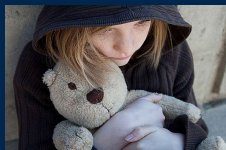
Withdrawal/refusal to answer questions

Difficulty separating from caregiver

Freezing/unresponsive

Child Traumatic Stress

- Children's past experience with traumatic events can influence their reaction to the current crisis
- Immediate medical emergency can act as a trigger for additional and more intense reactions
- Over 60% of children experience a potentially traumatic event by the age of 16



What is a Traumatic Event?

A frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a real (or perceived) threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of someone else can also be traumatic.

Potentially traumatic situations

- *Physical/sexual abuse*
- *Witnessing community or domestic violence*
- *Neglect or abandonment by a parent or caregiver*
- *Automobile or other types of accidents*
- *Physical violence, including bullying*
- *Witnessing police activity or having someone close arrested*
- *Witnessing another person being killed or seriously injured*
- *Death of or other loss of someone close*

Trauma Reactions



Trauma Informed Approach

- Promote safety
- Develop trust
- Provide choices
- Collaborate

Responder Reactions

- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing
- Muscle tension – particularly in the chest, neck, shoulders, or back
- Increased heart rate
- Headache or upset stomach
- Increased irritability
- Difficulty focusing or paying attention
- Difficulty making decisions

Engage – Calm - Distract



Safety

- If the child is in an unsafe setting, get her or him away as quickly as possible
- Limit the number of people around the child. Have one person take charge of talking to the child
- Use the parent/caregiver help comfort the child
- Let the child know you are there to keep him or her safe and to help
- Ask the child what would help them feel safer, or what has helped them feel safer in the past

Quickly Building Rapport

- Get as close as you can to the **child's level** physically
- **Speak softly** and gently
- **Introduce yourself**, use their name and explain that you are there to help them.
- Have a few **small "distraction" toys** available
- **Ask them questions** about their pets, friends, favorite activities, the comfort item they want or chose, etc.

General Tips

- Be honest and sensitive
- Ask what questions they have
- Provide sequence of events with sensory info
- Offer choices only when choices are available
- Have just one person talking to the child (One Voice)
- Watch for their cues: body language, facial expressions
- State expectations in a positive manner

Calming the Child

- Model deep, slow breathing. Instead of saying "just breathe" try saying "Watch me. Let's practice taking a big, slow breath together."
- Pinwheels or bubbles are great visual tools to encourage deep breathing. You can order bubbles that clip onto your badge/lanyard.
- Encourage squeezing a stress ball.
- Validate the child's feelings and assure that you are there to help them.

Providing Distraction

- Verbal games – “I Spy” or “Twenty Questions”
- Give them a job
- Small items that are fun, different, capture their attention, and give them something to focus on.
- Parents can be engaged to distract their child. It can decrease their stress/anxiety to have an active role.
- Use items that can be wiped down (avoid cloth items) or use single use items.

Distraction Tools



- Interactive/push-button books
- Pinwheel/bubbles (for deep breathing)
- View Master/Kaleidoscope
- Light up toys/ “meteor storm”
- “20 questions” electronic game
- Small glitter wands
- Fidget Spinner



Language

Avoid:	Try:
“Don’t worry, everything will be OK.”	Acknowledge their concerns. Let them know that you are there to help them. Ask what would be helpful.
Telling children what not to do as in “Don’t...”	Describe what you want them to do: “Your job is to...”
“Good job!”	“You worked really hard on... or “I liked the way you...” (Focus on the process that led to the outcome.)
“Here, I’ll do it.”	“Let’s do this together.”
“Show me how brave you are (or what a big kid you are).”	“It’s OK to cry.” “I know that this is really scary.”

Language may need to be minimized for children on the autism spectrum in order to increase their comprehension.

How to Answer Difficult Questions

- Never give life changing news to the child. They deserve to be in a calm, safe environment with loved ones when they are given bad news.
- When they are asking questions which you cannot or should not answer:
 - Validate the concern and difficulty in not knowing.
 - Let them know you do not have the answers.
 - Assure them that when more is known, they will be told what is happening or what happened.
 - Shift their focus to what is happening right now.

Examples

- **Loss of home/property, etc:** "We don't know for sure yet what happened. I know it's really hard not to have answers. When we know more we will tell you. For now, we need to focus on helping you by..."
- **Fatality:** "I don't know exactly what happened because I have been with you. I know it's really hard not to know what's happening with _____. Once we know more we will tell you. For now, we need to focus on helping you by..."

Dealing with Parents

- Keep parent/caregiver and child together unless contra-indicated
- Give them a job - Involve parent in child's care (e.g. holding hand, guiding child in deep breathing, talking or singing to the child)
- Foster sense of collaboration
- Give choices when possible

Overview of the Resource Kit

Engage – Calm – Distract

Understanding and Responding to Children in Crisis

<https://cdphe.colorado.gov/engage-calm-distract>

Pediatric Emotional Distress Reference System (PEDRS)

www.pedrs.org

7 – 11 Years (School Age)

Common Reactions 7 – 11 Years (School Age)

Difficulty paying attention/easily distracted

Easily startled

Asking about the event/what you are doing/what things are (perseverating on a question)

Physical complaints not directly related to medical condition (c/o stomach ache/headache)

Difficulty with authority/following directions/being redirected

Easily angered/temper tantrums

Sad/crying

Screaming uncontrollably

Withdrawal/refusal to answer questions

Difficulty separating from caregiver

Freezing/unresponsive

24 -29 kg

30 – 36 kg

7 – 11 (School Age)

Calm

- Deep breathing (in through nose out through mouth)
- Ask child if she/he would like a stuffed animal
- 5 things child sees/hears/touches-feels (make sure child is away from distressing stimuli)
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Plastic bottle
- Play I-Spy
- Ask child what she/he does to calm down
- Give the child a Koosh ball, tangle or fidget spinner
- Let child listen to music on his/her phone (provide headphones if needed)

24 -29 kg

Distraction

- Gitter wand/items floating
- Maracas Storm
- I-Spy
- Listen to music on their phone/play video game
- Kaleidoscope
- Give the child a job – something simple he/she can do
- View Master
- Seek and Find/20 Questions/Where's Waldo

30 – 36 kg

10



Questions?

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