

# Pediatric Emotional Distress Reference System

A Companion to:

Engage – Calm – Distract

*Understanding and Responding to Children in Distress*

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## Common Distress Reactions

This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list of distress reactions among children. Reactions can vary significantly within developmental level. When distressed, children often regress to behaviors found in earlier developmental stages. The reference cards include the most common reactions you are likely to experience in working with pediatric patients. Symptoms of emotional distress can also be indicative of medical distress. Rule out physical causes first. Many calming and distraction strategies identified on the other side of this tape can be used while addressing medical issues.

**Note:** Developmental levels are based upon age. If you don't know the child's age, weight ranges are approximate estimates of developmental level. Use child's actual age when known. Developmental level can vary higher or lower than child's chronological age.

## Calming and Distraction

Strategies and activities are arranged by developmental level and are intended as general guidelines based upon the child's age. Children frequently regress to behaviors found in earlier developmental levels when distressed. If a child is exhibiting regressed behaviors, you might start with calming and distraction activities found in the stage where they appear to be functioning. You might need to try several strategies/activities before finding one that the child will respond to.

**Note:** Developmental levels are based upon age. If you don't know the child's age, weight ranges are approximate estimates of developmental level. Use child's actual age when known. Developmental level can vary higher or lower than child's chronological age.

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## Birth – 1 Year (Infant)

### Common Reactions Birth to 1 Year (Infant)

The range and number of distress reactions increase across the first year of development.

**Crying/screaming** – can become so intense that the infant turns red and can briefly stop breathing

**Biting** – becomes more pronounced as infant begins teething

**Sucking**

**Turning away/avoiding eye contact when handled**

**Increased startle response**

**Arching back/leg or arm extension**

**Clinging** – not letting go or clinching fist

**Difficulty separating from caregiver**

**Freezing** – conscious but non-reactive to stimuli, staring “off into space”

**Hiccupping**

3

3 – 4 kg

8 – 9 kg

6 – 7 kg

## 1 – 2 Years (Toddler)

### Common Reactions 1 – 2 Years (Toddler)

**Crying/Screaming**

**Difficulty separating from caregiver** – holding on tightly, reaching out or trying to grab back on when pulled apart

**Hitting**

**Biting**

**Pushing away**

**Throwing objects**

**Easily startled**

**Withdrawal** – not answering questions, not looking at you, showing no interest in toy or comfort item presented

**Freezing** – blank stare, non-responsive

5

10 -12 kg

13 – 14 kg

Birth – 1 Year (Infant)	
3 – 4 kg	<b>Calming</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If parent/caregiver is available and able to respond to your directions, have them hold or caress the infant</li> <li>● Talk to infant in soft soothing voice</li> <li>● Gently caress the infant's arm or leg</li> <li>● Wrap the infant in a blanket</li> <li>● Provide a pacifier (if you provide one, ask parent permission before giving it to their child).</li> <li>● Bottle (provided by parent)</li> </ul>
6 – 7 kg	
8 – 9 kg	<b>Distraction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hold up a stuffed animal/colorful object in infant's visual field and slowly move it from side to side</li> <li>● Provide a bottle or pacifier (see calming activities for further instructions)</li> <li>● Have parent/caregiver talk quietly, using their normal language</li> <li>● Allow parent/caregiver into child's visual field</li> <li>● Talk to infant in a quiet soothing voice</li> <li>● Play Peek-a-Boo</li> </ul>

1 – 2 Years (Toddler)	
10 -12 kg	<b>Calming</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Allow parent/caregiver to stay with child when possible</li> <li>● Provide a stuffed animal or have parent get the child's favorite object</li> <li>● Talk in a quiet, soothing voice</li> <li>● Sing softly</li> <li>● Have child sing their favorite song</li> <li>● Cover child in a blanket</li> </ul>
13 – 14 kg	<b>Distraction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interactive books/musical light up toys</li> <li>● Singing</li> <li>● Stuffed Animals</li> <li>● Ask parent/caregiver to play a favorite game</li> <li>● Give child a penlight and show them how it works (pretend the penlight is a candle and have child blow it out)</li> <li>● Use a puppet to talk to the child or give instructions</li> <li>● Talk in a funny voice</li> <li>● Ask what sound a _____ (cat, dog, cow, etc.) makes.</li> </ul>

### 3 – 6 Years (Preschool)

#### Common Reactions 3 – 6 Years (Preschool)

**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** (c/o stomach ache/headache)

**Wetting pants**

**Difficulty separating from caregiver**

**Freezing** – conscious but non-reactive to stimuli, staring “off into space”

7

15 -18 kg

19 – 23 kg

### 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**

9

24 -29 kg

30 – 36 kg

3 – 6 Years (Preschool)	
<p><b>Calming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have child take deep, slow breaths with you</li> <li>• Use a pin wheel or blow bubbles to facilitate deep breathing</li> <li>• Ask child about their favorite toy, stuffed animal, pet, etc. (get specifics such as color, name)</li> <li>• Let parent/caregiver hold child's hand or stroke arm, leg</li> <li>• Give child a stuffed animal</li> <li>• Ask child to tell you how to play their favorite game</li> <li>• Have child identify 5 things they see/hear (make sure child is in a safe place without distressing stimuli)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Distraction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a glitter wand or meteor storm</li> <li>• Interactive book/musical light up toys</li> <li>• Have child sing to you</li> <li>• Show the child how to use a kaleidoscope</li> <li>• Give the child a job – something simple they can do</li> <li>• Give a stuffed animal, have the child name it, tell a story about where it came from, wrap it in a blanket, etc.</li> </ul>
15 -18 kg	19 – 23 kg

7 – 11 (School Age)	
<p><b>Calming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep breathing (in through nose, out through mouth)</li> <li>• Ask child if they would like a stuffed animal</li> <li>• 5 things child sees/hears/touches-feels (make sure child is away from distressing stimuli)</li> <li>• Squeeze a stress ball</li> <li>• Plastic slinky</li> <li>• Play I-Spy</li> <li>• Ask child what they do to calm down when upset</li> <li>• Give the child a Koosh ball, tangle or fidget spinner</li> <li>• Let child listen to music on their phone (provide headphones if needed)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Distraction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Glitter wand/items floating</li> <li>• Meteor Storm</li> <li>• I-Spy</li> <li>• Listen to music on their phone/play video game</li> <li>• Kaleidoscope</li> <li>• Give the child a job – something simple they can do</li> <li>• View Master</li> <li>• Seek and Find/20 Questions/Where's Waldo</li> </ul>
24 -29 kg	30 – 36 kg

## 12 – 17 Years (Adolescent)

### Common Reactions 12 – 17 Years (Adolescent)

Difficulty paying attention/easily distracted  
Easily startled  
Asking about the event/what you are doing/what things are (perseverating on a question)  
Wanting to know how bad it is/what will happen to them  
Focused on cell phone/social media/contacting friends  
Physical complaints not directly related to medical condition (c/o stomach ache/headache)  
Difficulty with authority/following directions/being redirected  
Aggressive behavior – verbal and/or physical  
Sad/crying  
Withdrawal/refusal to answer questions  
Freezing/unresponsive  
Attempting to act as if nothing is wrong/they are not afraid

11

37 kg and Above

## Parent/Caregiver

### Common Reactions Parent/Caregiver

Overly intrusive – wanting to know everything you are doing and why  
Difficulty separating from child – hanging on to child/hovering – making it difficult to gather information from child or provide help for the child  
Inability to focus/answer questions  
Easily distracted  
Giving too much or unrelated information  
Worry/concern about what is going to happen  
Panic  
Crying  
Anger/verbal aggression  
Withdrawal  
Freeze/Unresponsive

13

Parent/Caregiver

Parent/Caregiver	
<p><b>Calming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask parent/caregiver to look at you and take deep, slow abdominal breaths (in through nose, out through mouth)</li> <li>● Touch or gently hold parent's/caregiver's forearm between wrist and elbow (ask permission)</li> <li>● Give parent/caregiver something to hold – pen, koosh ball, stress ball, paperclip, anything handy</li> <li>● Have parent/caregiver close their eyes and describe the feeling against skin-ground, breeze, etc. (Avoid this activity unless removed from any distressing stimuli.)</li> <li>● Let parent/caregiver know that it is normal to feel afraid and concerned</li> </ul>	<p><b>Distraction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask parent/caregiver for information that you need to better help the child</li> <li>● Ask parent/caregiver to retrieve a favorite object that comforts their child</li> <li>● Ask parent/caregiver how they comfort and calm the child</li> <li>● Give parent/caregiver a task or job to do</li> <li>● Have parent/caregiver fill out a form with personal and medical information about the child (even if it is not required)</li> <li>● Ask if there is someone the parent/caregiver would like to call (or have you call) for support</li> <li>● Give parent/caregiver a role in the child's care</li> </ul>
14	

12 – 17 Years (Adolescent)	
<p><b>Calming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask child what they do to calm down when upset</li> <li>● Let child listen to music on their phone (provide headphones if needed)</li> <li>● Have child focus on you and do deep abdominal breathing (in through nose, out through mouth)</li> <li>● Tangle/sensory item</li> <li>● Koosh ball/Stress ball (brain shape works well)</li> <li>● Texting (see Distraction box for guidelines)</li> <li>● Ask questions about child's favorite activities</li> <li>● 5 things child sees/hears/touches-feels (make sure child is away from distressing stimuli)</li> <li>● Let child know that it is normal of feel afraid, stress, worried</li> </ul>	<p><b>Distraction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Let child listen to music on their phone (provide headphones if needed)</li> <li>● Allow child to text friends (no pictures, ask about who/what they are texting, discontinue if it becomes disruptive/distressful, do not allow if event could be reported on news or involved fatalities)</li> <li>● Watch video or play game on their phone</li> <li>● Fidget spinner or tangle</li> <li>● Seek &amp; Find/20 Questions/Where's Waldo (younger adolescents)</li> <li>● Have child tell you about his/her favorite movie/pet/sport, etc.</li> <li>● Koosh/stress ball</li> </ul>
12	37 kg and Above