

Supporting Young Children Experiencing Adversity During Covid 19



► Introduction

In most early years settings there are children who live in situations where there are risk factors for their wellbeing, learning and development. Such risk factors include poverty and social isolation, discrimination, parental mental illness, homelessness, alcohol or drug addiction, domestic abuse, death and loss. Some children have experienced inconsistent parenting and some have experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse and/or neglect.

Covid 19 has also become a risk factor for children and some children have been more adversely affected than others by the impact of Covid 19 since it began. For many children such adversity is new, while for others, negative impacts of Covid 19 have been added to adversities they were already experiencing. A lack of access to the supports usually available in the community means that, for those families who would normally avail of such supports, the pressures are even greater.

As an early years educator, it is essential that you have an understanding of the kinds of stresses and challenges children and their families may be experiencing in their everyday lives and the impacts these have on children's wellbeing, learning and development so you can fully support the child while they are in the setting.

High quality environments, experiences and relationships in early childhood are the key forces in building emotional security, resilience and mental health and they directly impact brain development and human potential.

[Center on the Developing Child, Harvard](#)



The Impacts of Covid 19 on Children

Covid 19 has adversely impacted on children's lives in a number of ways, and these are becoming more and more commonplace. These include:

- ▶ Parents may be very stressed due to a change in their financial circumstances and may not be able to respond calmly and focus on their child's needs.
- ▶ Parents' mental health may have suffered due to fear, anxiety or social isolation, as well as lack of access to their usual supports. As a result, they may struggle with the demands of parenting.
- ▶ Tensions may be heightened or there may be ongoing conflict among family members due to the impact of Covid 19 restrictions on family life.
- ▶ Pre-existing issues within the home, such as parental substance misuse or domestic violence, may have become exacerbated.
- ▶ Parents may be less attentive and responsive or even negative in responses towards children due to the stresses of additional demands being placed on them, for example, in their jobs.
- ▶ Children may not have been able to see or hug family members or friends to whom they are attached, such as grandparents, for long periods of time, and may have lost friendships due to restrictions on meeting up.
- ▶ Children may experience heightened anxiety due to the increased levels of anxiety being experienced by those around them, especially those children who are naturally more sensitive.
- ▶ Children may have lost someone close to them through bereavement or restrictions and there are fewer supports available to help them cope with this loss.
- ▶ Children may be getting fewer opportunities to play outside and less physical activity, which may impact on their feelings and their behaviour.
- ▶ There may be less routine and structure to the day, which can be unsettling for children.
- ▶ Children with disabilities may have been additionally adversely impacted by their parents' lack of access to respite and some or all of the professional supports they need.

- ▶ Young babies who were born a short time before or during the pandemic may have been adversely impacted by their mother's lack of access to the kinds of supports new mothers could normally rely on.

Children who are disabled and children who are highly sensitive transitioning into the early years setting on their own every day may be feeling particularly distressed about coming into a place where they can see their parents are not allowed to enter due to Covid 19 restrictions. Not being able to have the support of their parent when they come inside the early years setting, especially on days when they feel more vulnerable due to ongoing tensions and changes, may create or lead to further anxiety.

The Covid 19 pandemic has not just impacted on children and families. It has also been a very difficult time for early years educators, both personally and professionally. Your own self-care is really important to enable you to manage early signs of burnout and ensure that you are in a position to be able to provide quality education and care to others.



Children and Stress

We know that traumatic stress in childhood has lasting detrimental effects on a person's health, behaviour and life outcomes when not buffered by caring adults who are there to support them. This makes it particularly important that early years educators respond appropriately to signs of distress in children and support children who appear to be becoming overwhelmed.



When children experience a lot of stress, their stress response system is activated, triggering a fight, flight or freeze survival response, an automatic response everyone has when they feel under threat or are overwhelmed. You will see it in a child's behaviour and their demeanour. Considering what might be behind a child's behaviour or their demeanour, and what they might be communicating through their behaviour, is the first step in responding appropriately to their needs. Children's behaviour typically communicates how they are feeling. When

you observe behaviour that is concerning, it is often because the child is communicating their distress and their need to connect with someone and feel safe. Understanding the purpose or meaning of the challenging behaviour helps with choosing appropriate ways to respond.

The table below provides examples of behaviours that you might observe in a child who is showing a stress response and what it is that the child might be feeling. It is important to remember that children are not always aware of what it is they are feeling.

Stress response	Behaviour	How child might be feeling
Fight	• Hurting others	'I feel scared and in danger'
	• Yelling and screaming	
	• Demanding and controlling	'I feel unsafe and I need to be in control'
	• Throwing and breaking toys	
	• Trying to solve problems by hitting, biting or pushing	
	• Having tantrums	'I feel unlovable and unimportant'
	• Easily frustrated	
	• Not eating or sleeping	
	• Not playing with other children	
Flight	• Hiding under tables, covering face, eyes and ears	'I feel overwhelmed and panicked'
	• Running away	
	• Wanting to leave the room	'I feel scared and I need to get away'
	• Bumping into others	
	• Clinging to adults or shunning them	
	• Avoiding new tasks	'I feel trapped'
	• Limited interest in play	
	• Constantly high activity levels	
	• Not eating or sleeping	
	• Not playing with other children	
Freeze	• Unusually quiet or withdrawn	'I feel scared and anxious'
	• Unresponsive to questions or their name being called	
	• Appears sleepy	'I feel disconnected like I'm in a dream'
	• Difficulty making decisions	
	• Difficulty following directions	
	• Difficulty focusing on or completing a task	
	• Not eating	
	• Not playing with other children	

Behaviours such as those outlined in the table above require understanding and positive, supportive responses.



The Importance of Relationships

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard¹ identifies ‘... the critical impact of a child’s “environment of relationships” on developing brain architecture during the first months and years of life’ (p.1) and cites evidence that these relationships literally shape brain circuits and lay the foundation for later academic performance, mental health and inter-personal skills.

Children need to know that the adults in their lives really care about them. If they feel a positive emotional connection, they are more likely to feel secure and happy, be cooperative and relate well to others.

Establishing a Key Person relationship for each child attending your setting is especially helpful as strong positive relationships are a protective factor for children, particularly for vulnerable young children. It is also important for children to have many one-to-one interactions and small group rather than large group interactions, as these allow children to express their

needs and feelings more easily. As a child’s Key Person, time spent with you quietly reading a book together, for example, can provide opportunities for a vulnerable child to feel connected and to talk about what is happening in their life and how they are feeling.

As a Key Person, you will also recognise a child’s individual needs more quickly and make adjustments to suit the child’s temperament, for example, offering more time for a sensitive child or more physical activity for a child who needs to ‘let off steam’. You can also make regular connections throughout the day, letting the child know you are keeping them in mind even when you are not with them, ‘I was thinking about you last night, I saw a film about dinosaurs and I was thinking Josh would love this film’.

For babies and young children, crying is a very powerful signal for attention. It is the main way that young infants communicate distress. Whether a baby cries a lot or a little, it is important that you respond to their cries quickly and consistently. Babies who are consistently responded to in a positive way learn that the adults around them can be trusted to support them if they are in distress. This is particularly important for babies who do not always experience responsive care. A consistent, supportive response is part of building a supportive relationship with young children that will be a protective factor in their life and help them to grow, learn and develop.

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Young children develop in an environment of relationships*. Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child.





Providing for Play

Research tells us that children use free play to express their emotions and learn to deal with their fears and stressful experiences. The essence of free play is that it is child-initiated, child-led, and not directed by adults. Play and the creative arts help children cope by providing a medium where they can express the thoughts and concerns that they can't speak about and they can 'play out' their fears and traumas. Through free play, children express emotions from situations that they have no control over. By facing challenges at a distance, a child can address uncomfortable issues, and therefore the impact of the experience is lessened. This happens in a very natural way, is healthy and should be encouraged.

Your role as the educator is to provide a thoughtfully planned environment, frequent opportunities and enough uninterrupted free play time for this to happen, while being available nearby to observe and provide support if required.

Providing open-ended materials like sand, water, sticks, blocks and art materials provides opportunities for choice and control, and to play out different roles and scenarios. Small world play and real world items in the Home Corner that reflect the home cultures of the children in the play-pod are also very helpful.

There is increasing evidence that spending time in natural outdoor environments can help children who are exposed to stressful events to be less anxious.

The Effect of the Environment

The organisation of space in an early childhood setting can either help with or hinder a child's feelings of security and wellbeing, and will significantly influence behaviour.

Ensuring that there is a nurturing atmosphere and comfort in young children's surroundings will support their feelings of security. This is particularly important for children who are more vulnerable due to the impact of trauma or ongoing stresses in their lives and for children with disabilities.

You can achieve a supportive environment by:

- ▶ Personalising children's spaces, for example, cubbies that children recognise as just for them, with their photo and their name.
- ▶ Retaining warmth, softness and cosiness in the environment, while adhering to infection prevention guidelines.
- ▶ Allowing for movement rather than too much sitting at tables or waiting in lines. Playing outdoors as much as possible.
- ▶ Having materials, equipment and furnishings that children can easily access independently, providing for children's choices and reducing frustrations.
- ▶ Ensuring that the space is designed and laid out so that children with disabilities feel included rather than separate or different.
- ▶ Placing children's seating with their backs to a wall or high boundary – this supports a sense of safety and security.
- ▶ Ensuring a friendly atmosphere with smiling, relaxed adults.
- ▶ Familiarity – not making big changes to the layout of the space or the way the space is used without involving the children.
- ▶ Predictability – not moving children from one room to another unexpectedly, children knowing what room they will be going to when they arrive in the morning.
- ▶ Safety – ensuring that children feel safe.
- ▶ Providing for privacy. Children need opportunities to release their emotions in a quiet space away from the pressures of the expectations of others. It is important to observe them, to be able read their cues and be on hand to provide support.
- ▶ Creating an environment that contributes to children's engagement and relationships with cosy corners, spaces for two, interesting things to do and activities that involve cooperation and helping.



It is important to remember that an overload of sensory stimulation and noise is likely to exacerbate children's feelings of discomfort and anxiety, and result in undesired behaviours. Comfort and security results from a balance of stimulation – neither too much nor too little.

You can further reduce stress in children by ensuring that you provide a predictable and consistent routine, for example, have meals at the same time, in the same way, in the same place using the same language, and by setting clear and consistent limits, such as 'no biting' and 'use gentle touch'.

Supporting Children with their Behaviour

When developing an approach to guiding young children's behaviour, always begin with the understanding that babies and young children need protection, secure and caring relationships, responsive interactions and a sense of self-worth. They need these more than ever in these troubled times.

When behaviour is challenging or disruptive it may be difficult to think about what a child is experiencing rather than what you are experiencing with them, especially when you yourself are under additional stress. When you understand what the experience is like from the child's perspective, you will be much more likely to empathise and offer support in ways that are helpful.

It takes time for a young child to learn to say calmly what they want and feel, to be able to control their emotions, recognise their own and others' emotions, control emotional outbursts, and to deal with frustrations. It takes time to learn how to invite others to play, take turns, react positively to others, be able see others' point of view and resolve conflicts. Not all

adults have learned such skills. It is important to have realistic expectations of young children, especially those experiencing ongoing significant adversity in their lives.

It is important to make it clear to children that *all* feelings are okay, while letting them know that some behaviours (how they act out their feelings) are not okay (aggression, violence, name-calling, bullying, etc.)

Look for opportunities to model or coach appropriate behaviour. Name what you think are the child's and others' emotional experiences, and use expressions, voice and gestures to mirror their emotions.

Acknowledge when you notice desired behaviour.



Crying is a healthy expression of emotion and is healing. Assure children that it is not wrong to express emotions by crying. Children who are encouraged and supported to freely express their thoughts and their feelings such as joy, sadness, anger, frustration and fear can develop positive ways to cope with new, challenging or stressful situations.



Supporting the Development of Resilience

We know that risk factors in a child's life circumstances cluster together in the lives of the most vulnerable children, and that the risk of poor outcomes for children increases in line with the number of risk factors. Some children will be more resilient in the face of multiple risk factors than other children because of protective factors in their lives. These protective factors (things that mitigate the risks) might include the child's participation in a quality early years service and a positive supportive relationship with at least one adult who shows understanding of their needs and wishes.

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.

[Center on the Developing Child, Harvard](#)

Resilience can be described as the capacity to resist or bounce back from adversities. You can support children to develop resilience through your positive relationship with them.

- ▶ Help young children to speak about their feelings and to understand that all feelings are ok and it is what we do with our feelings that matters.
- ▶ Provide children with choices and opportunities to be successful.
- ▶ Support children to learn to problem-solve and resolve conflicts positively (see [HighScope conflict resolution](#)).
- ▶ When a child is upset, angry or distressed, acknowledge their feelings, 'I can see you're upset about not being able to go outside' or 'It's ok to cry'.
- ▶ Model patience, calm, persistence and humour.
- ▶ Allow long periods for uninterrupted child-led play with easy access to open-ended materials.
- ▶ Enjoy music and dance and fun activities together, with joining in always optional.



Emotional Co-regulation

When children are distressed and feeling overwhelmed by big feelings, they have become emotionally dysregulated. For children to return to a regulated state they need the help of a responsive, caring adult. This co-regulation is a powerful tool to support children's emotional well-being. When we use co-regulation, children learn to feel cared for, safe and protected.

If a child becomes distressed, it is important to acknowledge their feelings and to offer comfort. Understand that if a child is very distressed they will find it difficult to access their thinking brain and may not be able to put their feelings into words, tell you what's wrong or problem solve. They will also find it difficult to follow any instructions.

When you use co-regulation you are organising the child's feelings. 'I can see you are really sad, you wanted to stay with Daddy. I'm going to stay with you and keep you safe.'



Sometimes we can be very uncomfortable with children's feelings of distress and we try to distract from or 'fix' situations. Try taking a deep breath and thinking, 'What is this child feeling right now? What does this child need from me?'

When the child has returned to a calm and alert state, this is the time to talk with them about situations they are finding difficult and, if appropriate, to come up with solutions together. 'You were really upset this morning when you were leaving your Daddy. I wonder if there is something we could do tomorrow to make it easier?'

Partnership with Parents

Building and maintaining trust with parents is challenging due to the restrictions on parents' physical access to early years settings, but a good relationship with parents is an essential feature of quality early years provision.

The transitions from home to the early years setting are challenging for all young children when their parents cannot access the building with them to help settle them in. They are especially challenging for very young children and children who do not feel secure and confident due to inconsistencies in their care.

Parents want the best for their children and it is always important to maintain communication with parents about how their child is getting on while in your setting. It is important to share information with parents about their child's interests and their achievements, as well

as their physical, psychological and emotional needs and their wellbeing. It is important also to create opportunities for parents to tell you how things are for their child at home so that you can provide them with appropriate support. It may be helpful to share some support information with all families in the context of the additional challenges brought about by the pandemic. You will find links to parent resources on page 9.

You can also model good practice for parents in a positive way by sharing photos with captions of simple to replicate activities that their child was involved in, and highlighting their child's positive engagement and the areas of learning covered, by referring to the Aistear themes.

Where families need additional support, the early years setting can act as an important link by assisting families with accessing specialist supports in the community.

If you ever have a concern for a child's welfare you have an obligation to report this to Tusla. Parents should be very clear on this from your policies. You can find more information in [A Guide for the Reporting of Child Protection and Welfare Concerns](#) or can contact Tusla directly. If you are unsure whether to report, you can obtain advice from [Tusla](#).



Observation and Documentation

Observations and good documentation are essential for quality early learning and care. They will deepen your knowledge of each child and their individual needs, and support you to plan effectively for children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Through observation and documentation, you will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning opportunities, the learning environment provided, and the approaches that have been taken to support children's wellbeing and social and emotional development. You will also be better able to identify children who may need additional support to achieve wellbeing, learning and development goals, and to effectively provide that support in partnership with their parents.

Always think about what an experience is like for a child who may be feeling sad, anxious, afraid, lonely, unable to understand what's happening or what's being said. Observe what the child is communicating through their behaviour. If their behaviour is causing them or others difficulty, consider what you might help them to do instead.

Further Resources

Barnardos Resources

- [Support for Early Learning and Care Settings during Covid-19 Crisis](#)
- [Promoting Wellbeing in Your Team](#)
- [Working in Partnership with Parents: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals \(ebook\)](#)
- [The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years \(ebook\)](#)
- [The Key Person Approach: Supporting Relationships in the Early Years Setting \(elearning\)](#)
- [An Introduction to the Rights of the Child in Early Learning and Care \(elearning\)](#)

Other Resources

- [Child Safeguarding](#)
- [First 5 Guidance for ELC Services](#)
- [Aistear Siolta Practice Guide](#)
- [Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework](#)
- [Access and Inclusion Model \(AIM\)](#)
- [Information about Services For Children, Young People and Families](#)

For parents

- [Barnardos Heart, Body and Mind](#)
- [A Parents Guide to Partnership in Childcare \(ebook\)](#)
- [Your Young Child's Behaviour: How You Can Help \(ebook\)](#)
- [First 5 Resources for Parents](#)

Further specialist information resources are available from [Barnardos library](#)



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