

PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA) (PART 2):

COMMON REACTIONS TO STRESS IN CHILDREN

The Bottom Line

Children often display common reactions when experiencing stress from a traumatic event. Stress in children may sometimes appear very much like the stress of an adult, but can also manifest through other reactions not typically associated with being stressed. Recognizing and responding quickly to children's stress will reduce the stress-related impacts of the event.

Common Reactions to Stress in Children

Emotional Reactions

Increased worries or fears about self or others.
Worries or fears about separation and/or loss.
Worries or fears about reoccurrence of the traumatic event.
Feelings of guilt and helplessness.

Behavioural Reactions

Changes in school performance.
Decreased attention and concentration.
Changes in sleep.
Changes in appetite.
Increase in anger outbursts, irritability, and mood swings.
Increased withdrawal and behavioural regression.

Cognitive Reactions

Repetitive questions, discussions, or story-telling about the traumatic event.
Willful misinterpretations about the event.
Excessive interest in media coverage.
Keeping trauma and loss reminders from being accessible.
Difficult time learning during and after a crisis.

Physiological Reactions

Increased sensitivity to stimuli (e.g. certain sounds).
Increased startle response.
Increased somatic complaints including headaches, stomach aches, body pains and fatigue.



Possible Responses

Psychological First Aid (PFA) can be administered by any adult to any child or youth as an acute intervention for the alleviation of stress. PFA involves observing any symptoms of stress, inquiring about feelings, deeply listening to concerns from the child or youth, and responding appropriately.

- Consider the child's age and developmental level when assessing stress reactions. Provide appropriate PFA to support the child in the moment.
- Ask relevant and indirect questions to confirm or redirect attention to the appropriate issue that may be causing stress in the child.
- Recognize when the behaviour of the child goes beyond regular stress and assist in connecting the child to advanced support.



For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca