



Early Adversity and stress triggers in the school Environment

Children who have suffered early adversity and whose emotional development has been altered may have difficulties in self-regulation and their relationships with peers. Small changes in classroom tasks or routines, or less regulated play activities such as recess or lunchtime, can be highly stressful. These situations may cause unexpected reactions because they are difficult for children to control.

Schools, specifically classrooms, should be safe spaces where children can feel confident and protected and somewhere to establish positive relationships with others. When a person feels safe and respected, it is easier for them to express their ideas and feelings. To this end, the teaching staff's collaboration is fundamental. It will be the key to group cohesion and creating a classroom climate characterised by responding to the needs of, for example, respect, self-esteem, and good coexistence.



Children who have experienced adversity at an early age may often feel that a seemingly innocent situation threatens their emotional or physical safety, despite a teacher's efforts to create a safe environment. The excessive stress levels children may encounter could cause them to react in unexpected ways.

In the face of this, the possible responses dictated by the brain are flight, attack, or blocking. In the school environment, this can translate into responses of inhibition, isolation, or disproportionate response that become visible through behaviours such as: rocking in chairs, being distracted in class, lack of attention, absenteeism, irritability, and getting angry. In these cases, it is necessary to be prepared and provide possible alternatives, avoiding improvisation or a reaction from an adult that may generate greater insecurity.

Some of the frequently-encountered circumstances that can be significant in causing high stress levels in these children include:

- **Separation from family or usual carers**

Going to school in the early hours of the morning or separating from the accompanying adult can be delicate moments. These potential flashpoints may require, for a certain period, to be agreed upon with the family or carers, thus avoiding the insecurity they might provoke.

- **Changes in classroom routines or activities**

A change in daily routines, a switch to a more difficult task, or an unexpected change of activity can shake children out of their comfort zones and their emotional security. Flexible but predictable routines, changes announced in advance or calmly explained, will go a long way to help you regain the stability you may need.

- **Tutor absence**

Tutors are important reference person people for children. Their unexpected absence, or the change of a specialist teacher without prior notice, are often significant determinants of a group's behaviour. In the case of children who have suffered early adversity, this can condition their responses even more acutely. Anticipating these developments whenever possible is one of the best options.

- **Free play times**

All the times of the day that are generally less structured —lunch times, free time in the playground, or during games— should be observed carefully. Children must reach agreements in play and sharing at these times and generally relate to others using their social skills. Conflicts and difficulties with the peer group arise when these skills fail. Paying attention, monitoring what happens, offering appropriate strategies for action, and putting them into practice with pupils will go a long way in helping them to manage these situations.

- **Homework and exams**

Doing homework outside school hours or preparing for an exam are often particularly stressful activities. This is especially true for children with more significant difficulties in organisation, planning or memorisation. Some measures to take into account are: agreeing on study times with family, strategies to follow when doing homework, and reducing or simplifying workloads when necessary.

Recommendations for teachers

From the first stages of preschool to baccalaureate, families or caregivers often feel that they must continuously explain their children's needs, especially concerning their behaviour or academic performance. The feeling families or caregivers usually express is that of living in a constant state of high alert because they cannot solve what is happening in the classroom. To be able to manage these situations, alongside close collaboration between family and school, the following is necessary:

- **Coordination between the educational team**

Good coordination between educational team members, plus a tutoring plan adjusted to the needs of each child, would improve the transfer of information between agencies. It also opens up the possibility of collaborative actions between group members.

- **Active listening**

Establishing good communication between the family and the school involves active listening on both sides, respecting each other's role and sharing resources that can help a student's learning process.

Ignoring the diversity of life experiences makes it easy to fall into using insensitive, exclusive and discriminatory labels, which negatively impacts the educational process's development.

- **Working with unseen adversities**

In many cases, adopted and fostered children or children living in residential centres have needs that are not visible and to which most teachers may be oblivious. It is necessary to be prepared to work with the sequelae they present, resulting from adversities that are part of their life history before adoption or foster care. One of the critical elements in understanding children is empathy.

- **Positive reinforcement**

Numerous research projects have shown that children react better to positive reinforcement of their behaviour and by avoiding sanctions and punishments. Measures agreed between a family and a school are an excellent example of collaboration, showing that both are working together for the child's well-being.

- **Pay attention to triggers**

Observe which triggers make children lose control and of which they are unaware. Identifying these triggers by monitoring their reactions will help the adult to understand a child's behaviour. It should be borne in mind that their responses are physiological and not thought out. This can be challenging for teachers to visualise when they do not have all the required information. In this case, verbal lessons are not enough to achieve self-regulation. It is necessary to practise — with the child — the strategies required to be able to exercise this self-control. It takes time for the child to integrate them. Sometimes, even when someone tries to cuddle and protect them, children who have suffered early adversity may identify this approach as a threat, reacting with aggressive or unexpected responses. Such care may also trigger alarms. Children may feel threatened or are reluctant to trust because of the previous harm they have experienced. These approaches must be made gradually, without imposition, and with a great deal of patience.

- **Teacher training**

Teacher training in the fields of adoption and foster care is essential for understanding and meeting the educational needs that this group may present. Children spend many hours at school, establishing relationships with peers and adults outside their family environment. Teachers must have sensitivity and prior knowledge of children that have suffered early adversity to face the different challenges that arise throughout the day.