

Stress Response Recognition Guide

How to identify fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses in children by age

Understanding Your Child's Stress Response

When children feel threatened — physically or emotionally — their autonomic nervous system activates a survival response. These responses are automatic and involuntary; children don't choose them. Recognizing which response your child defaults to allows you to provide the right type of support instead of accidentally escalating the situation.

The Four Stress Responses

RESPONSE	NERVOUS SYSTEM STATE	PURPOSE	CORE FEELING
Fight	Sympathetic activation (mobilized)	Eliminate the threat through confrontation	Anger, frustration, outrage
Flight	Sympathetic activation (mobilized)	Escape the threat through withdrawal	Fear, anxiety, panic
Freeze	Dorsal vagal shutdown (immobilized)	Become invisible / wait for threat to pass	Numbness, overwhelm, dissociation
Fawn	Mixed state (social engagement + survival)	Appease the threat through compliance	Fear masked as agreeableness, loss of self

Fight Response Signs by Age

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Toddlers (1-3)	Hitting, biting, kicking, throwing objects, screaming, head-banging, arching back, rigid body	Bad behavior, defiance, aggression
Preschool (3-5)	Yelling "NO!", pushing/shoving, destroying toys, oppositional refusal, threatening ("I hate you!"), clenched fists/jaw	Oppositional behavior, anger problem, being a bully
School-age (6-11)	Arguing back, slamming doors, verbal aggression, physical fights, destroying property, blaming others, defiant posture	Conduct disorder, disrespect, attitude problem

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Teens (12-18)	Explosive anger, verbal attacks, physical intimidation, punching walls, intense arguing, risk-taking behavior, rage that seems disproportionate	Anger management issues, disrespect, rebelliousness

SUPPORT STRATEGY

What helps in fight mode: Don't match their intensity. Lower your voice. Give physical space. Reduce demands. Say less, not more. "I can see you're really upset. I'm right here when you're ready."

Flight Response Signs by Age

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Toddlers (1-3)	Running away, hiding behind parent, covering eyes/ears, trying to leave the room, clinging desperately	Shyness, being clingy, separation anxiety (may actually be appropriate fear response)
Preschool (3-5)	Hiding under tables/beds, running to a different room, refusing to enter situations, excessive movement/restlessness, avoidance of certain people/places	ADHD hyperactivity, being difficult, shyness
School-age (6-11)	Avoiding school, stomach aches before stressful events, excessive busyness, changing the subject, nervous laughter, fidgeting, always wanting to leave	School refusal, laziness, ADHD, being antisocial
Teens (12-18)	Social withdrawal, avoiding eye contact, staying in their room, excessive phone/gaming use as escape, substance use, overachievement (running from failure), workaholic patterns	Being a loner, addiction, laziness, antisocial behavior

SUPPORT STRATEGY

What helps in flight mode: Don't chase or corner. Create safe spaces. Reduce the perceived threat. Offer an acceptable exit strategy. After they feel safe: "I noticed it was hard to stay. What felt scary about that?"

Freeze Response Signs by Age

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Toddlers (1-3)	Going limp, blank stare, sudden silence in a usually vocal child, falling asleep in stressful situations, not crying when hurt	Being easy/low-maintenance, being tired, not caring
Preschool (3-5)	Deer-in-headlights look, unable to answer questions, going mute, appearing "zoned out", not responding to their name, wetting themselves	Not listening, ignoring you, daydreaming, defiance
School-age (6-11)	Spacing out in class, inability to think or speak when called on, mind going blank on tests, appearing confused, emotional numbness, saying "I don't know" to everything	Not paying attention, being lazy, not caring about school, low intelligence
Teens (12-18)	Dissociation (feeling unreal or detached), emotional flatness, difficulty making decisions, chronic procrastination, depersonalization, appearing numb or indifferent	Not caring, apathy, laziness, depression (can co-occur)

SUPPORT STRATEGY

What helps in freeze mode: Speak softly and slowly. Offer physical grounding ("Can you feel your feet on the floor?"). Reduce demands to near zero. Gentle movement helps reactivate the system. Don't say "snap out of it."

Fawn Response Signs by Age

The fawn response is the least recognized but increasingly documented. It develops when fight, flight, and freeze haven't kept the child safe — so they learn to appease. It's most common in children who've experienced relational trauma.

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Toddlers (1-3)	Excessive smiling at strangers, not protesting when things are taken, looking to adults' faces before reacting, precocious caretaking of parent	Being easygoing, well-behaved, mature for their age
Preschool (3-5)	Excessive apologizing, giving away toys to avoid conflict, agreeing with everything, monitoring adults' moods, trying to make angry people happy	Being sweet, being a peacemaker, good manners
School-age (6-11)	People-pleasing, inability to say no, changing personality based on who they're with, taking blame they don't deserve, putting others' needs first compulsively, over-helpful	Being kind, a great kid, mature, a good friend

AGE GROUP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	OFTEN MISLABELED AS
Teens (12-18)	Chronic people-pleasing, no sense of personal boundaries, difficulty identifying own wants/needs, codependent relationships, performing perfectionism, saying yes to everything	Being selfless, kind, empathetic, a good student/friend

SUPPORT STRATEGY

What helps in fawn mode: Actively ask their opinion and make it safe to disagree. Praise boundary-setting ("I'm glad you told me you didn't want that"). Normalize saying no. Model your own boundaries. Never reward compliance that comes at their expense.

General Physical Signs of Stress in Children

Body Signs

- ✓ Stomach aches, headaches (no medical cause)
- ✓ Changes in appetite (eating much more or less)
- ✓ Sleep disruption (difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, night waking)
- ✓ Bedwetting after being dry
- ✓ Frequent illness (chronic stress suppresses immune function)
- ✓ Muscle tension, teeth grinding
- ✓ Changes in energy (wired or exhausted)

Behavioral Signs

- ✗ Regression to younger behavior (thumb-sucking, baby talk)
- ✗ New fears or increased clinginess
- ✗ Difficulty concentrating
- ✗ Irritability out of proportion to the trigger
- ✗ Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities
- ✗ Increased need for control (rituals, rigidity)
- ✗ Repetitive play themes involving the stressor

Quick-Reference: Response & Support

RESPONSE	CHILD'S NEED	PARENT ACTION	DO NOT
Fight	Discharge energy safely	Give space, stay calm, lower your volume	Match their intensity, yell back, physically restrain (unless safety requires it)
Flight	Feel safe enough to stay	Reduce threat, offer safe spaces, give time	Chase, corner, block exits, force them to "face it" in the moment
Freeze	Gentle reactivation	Soft voice, grounding, reduce demands	Yell to snap out of it, shake them, increase pressure
Fawn	Permission to have their own needs	Ask their opinion, celebrate boundaries	Praise compliance, reward self-sacrifice, ignore their needs

© 2026 Avaneuro · avaneuro.com · For educational purposes only. Not medical advice.

