

The School Age Update

North Carolina School Age Initiative

July-September 2020

Division of Child Development and Early Education



NC CCR&R Council



Southwestern Child Development Commission

Sticking Together During These Trying Times

North Carolina students are in the midst of a social-emotional whirlwind. From dealing with the stress associated with Covid-19 to managing the pressures of social injustice, school age children in our state face unprecedented levels of trauma and stress.

As school age professionals, we cannot afford to sit by and simply wait for this trying time to pass. We must use this period as an opportunity to band together as a profession and help our families and students thrive.

Renowned educator Stephen Anderson describes our goal in the best way: "Alone we are smart. Together we are brilliant." Take a moment to think about his statement.

- How many times in the past has your program connected with other school age programs in your area?
- When was the last time you or your staff connected with other community resources and organizations?

As the social and health challenges that affect our state continue to exist, we must leave our own "program bubbles" and reach out to those in our neighborhoods and communities with like-minded goals. Take time to network with other community-based groups and connect your families to their services. Touch base with other school age leaders and brainstorm ways to strengthen the reach and pull of your programs. Actively listen to your families and students and understand the triggers that are creating stress and trauma in their homes.

Partnering with other community resources will maximize the reach of your school age program, and equip your students and families with the tools they need in this time of change. Below are some quick tips on how to reach out to other community resources and ease the trauma affecting your local community:

- Create a local school age community group to network with other programs.
- Connect with your local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency to pool resources and ideas.
- Reach out to your local Chamber or Commerce to connect your school age program with local businesses.
- Create parent and family surveys to track the needs and stress points of those you serve.
- Work with other school age professionals and connect with local non-profits that assist families with Covid-19 and social injustice support.
- Set up a social network outreach group to connect with the community.
- Connect with local political representatives and advocate for school age care.





Listening and Stress

The American Psychology Association's *Stress in America 2020 Study*, highlights that roughly 71% of the nation's parents are stressed about the social and cognitive development of their school age child. Looking specifically at the effects of Covid-19 related quarantining and home isolation, the APA study states that 55% of American parents have noticed a dramatic decrease in their child's mood and overall behavior (APA, *Stress in America 2020 Study*, June 2020).

School age programs sit in a precarious spot when addressing the issues surrounding family and student stress. In one regard, we want our programs to function as mediums of hope, security, and growth for the families we serve. However, these goals are sometimes limited by issues like teacher turnover, minimal funding, and a lack of resources. With stress hitting our students and families from so many different directions, helping those in need address their personal struggles can easily create turmoil in our own lives.

Addressing stress doesn't have to be a hard process. As education professionals, we have one tool that helps address the stress-pandemic that is damaging our students, families, and surrounding communities...LISTENING.

American philanthropist Bernard Baruch emphasizes the power of listening in this simple quote: "Most of the successful people I've known are the ones who do more listening than talking."

When we take time to actively listen to others, we provide them with an easy way to mentally decompress and process information. A recent article by PBS reporter Lisa Gale, highlights that listening to others dealing with stress creates essential bonds that are necessary for human development. These bonds develop social trust, empathy, and help decrease stress hormone levels in the brain (PBS, *The Power of Listening*, 2019).

If we shift our focus to school age students, the effects of listening are even more pronounced. Actively listening to students establishes a high level of security and trust that is key to proper social development. For students dealing with Covid-19 related stress and isolation, having a listening adult is instrumental to relieve tension, process emotions, express abuse, and relearn acceptable social norms.

"Most of the successful people I've known are the ones who do more listening than talking."

Bernard Baruch



Listening to Students

Listening to students is not hard. Students yearn for adult approval and support. Sections of the program day like transitions, meal-time, activity periods, and large group meetings are perfect times to stop, listen, and measure student stress. Here are some quick ways to develop your listening skills with students:

- **Take time to sit down.** Students are drawn to adults and leaders who do not look too busy to sit and listen. Sitting with students during meal time and activity play is a great way to start conversations and understand their stress.
- **Value what students say.** When a student talks to you, make eye contact and listen to what they are trying to communicate. For some students, it might be helpful to get on the student's eye level and sit. No matter how mundane you think the conversation might be, valuing the discussion might be the link necessary to strengthen a student's mental health.
- **Put student ideas into action.** Many students surviving during Covid isolation have been left alone with a screen with little opportunity to expand their play and learning skills. Listen to student input into potential activities, and incorporate their interest into your lesson plans.
- **Provide students with different modes of expression.** Some students want you to listen, but they might have a hard time communicating their feelings. Expression through art, music, and writing are great mediums to communicate stress without words. Take interest in these expressions like you would a conversation, and use these mediums to assess how students are feeling.

Listening to Families

An essential part of an effective school age program is dealing with the stress of parents and guardians. Keeping students safe, healthy, and academically engaged during the Covid-19 pandemic is a challenge that consumes the thoughts of all families and caregivers. Listening to families is an important way to reduce the stress placed upon parents, and increase the effectiveness of your school age program. Here are some easy tips that can help improve the way your program listens and responds to families dealing with stress:

- Hold virtual parent forums with program staff and families. Use these events to listen to the issues affecting families and ways your program can help them. You can also set up virtual meetings between group leaders and families to work on specific learning goals for their child.
- Take time to listen to the physical and emotional needs of your families and connect them to the resources that will help them succeed. Having printable resources for mental health services, government assistance, and nutrition support will help families regain stability and decrease stress.

The Power of Routine



We have all seen that crazy classroom. Students running everywhere. Books and materials thrown about. Classrooms without a proper routine provide the perfect environment for challenging behaviors and burnt-out teachers.

In a recent article published in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, researchers Katherine Arlinghaus and Craig Johnston highlight the importance of routines to establish a healthy mental and physical lifestyle. According to the study, Americans that hold to a stable routine have longer life spans, better mental health, and more professional success. Moreover, individuals that follow a normal routine are more apt to form stronger relationships with peers and handle stress through positive outlets (AJLM, *The Importance of Creating Habits and Routine*, 2019).

The benefits of establishing set routines are just as important for students in school age care. Routines provide students with security and comfort. They help reduce the stress associated with activity and transition change, and offer a tangible indicator for the timeline of the day. For students dealing with the pressures of virtual learning, half-week school schedules, and the constant movement between the school day and afterschool program time, having set routines creates a source of consistency and a way to retain personal control.

The NC Healthy Social Behaviors Project highlights that students and children who are exposed to program-wide routines are more likely to develop appropriate coping and adaptation skills. These students are more inclined to display positive behaviors during transitions and build stronger relationships with peers and group leaders (NC HSBP, *Routines and Classroom Schedules*).

Below are some tips to help establish strong program routines during this Covid-19 pandemic.



Other Resources to Check Out

Jeremy Dean
Making Habits, Breaking Habits

Frances Jensen
The Teenage Brain

Lynn E. McClannahan
*Activity Schedules for Children with
Autism*

Olatokunbo Fashola
*Building Effective Afterschool
Programs*

Reflect On Your Daily Schedule

Your program's routines are closely tied to the daily schedule. Posted schedules are essential to help group leaders and students measure the course of the day and the timeline of learning activities. Trouble with routines occur when schedules become cluttered and cumbersome. Constantly transitioning students from one activity to another creates anxiety that will result in a wide range of challenging behaviors. Repetitive and overly detailed schedules also place undue stress on group leaders who feel the responsibility to follow program requirements.

Take time to reflect on your program's schedule and find transitions and activities that can either be removed or combined. Set aside larger sections of time for play, school work, and program activities to allow students to fully integrate into the activity at hand. Providing students with set 40 to 45 minute blocks of time to devote to a specific activity will establish strong routines and promote engagement and purpose.

For many programs operating during the pandemic, school age care might be extended into full day care. Having an intentional schedule will offer direction to students and keep them situated within the "in-person" school routine that they are accustomed too. Make an effort to reach out to the local elementary schools that serve your students and modify your program's daily schedule to replicate their instructional day as closely as possible. This process will establish common routines and help students succeed emotionally and academically.



Incorporate Health and Safety Routines

Setting up effective health and safety routines is essential for the overall well-being of your program. Reflect on your bathroom and hand washing routines and find ways that they can be improved to allow social distancing and proper sanitation. Setting up pre-marked areas six feet apart for students to wait during visits to the restroom is necessary to ensure that students remain safe. It is also important to incorporate DCDEE approved hand washing and sanitation routines into bathroom care to minimize Covid exposure. **Remember...consistency is key to creating safe bathroom routines.** Gentle reminders and discussions about social distancing and hand washing will need to take place to make these health practices common place.

Stay Consistent

In his book *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*, Dr. Jeremy Dean highlights that it takes the average person over sixty days of consistent action to create a habit (Dean, *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*, 2012). When thinking about establishing strong, regular routines, this two month span of consistency is important to remember. Group leaders must push through the temptation to constantly change the direction of their daily plans and attentively stick to the parameters of the program schedule. Being consistent does not mean that simple adaptation cannot occur. Bringing materials like blocks and dramatic play outside is key to expanding learning; however, make an attempt to keep outdoor and gross motor play scheduled around a consistent time of the day. Sticking to your classroom routines will help students stay focused on the task at hand and easily shift from one activity to the next.

School Age Supports For Your Program

The North Carolina School Age Initiative is here to help your school age program succeed. We are a state funded initiative that operates under the direction of the Division of Child Development and Early Education. Our regional school age consultants will work directly with your licensed afterschool, summer camp, or school age community center to help your program meet all quality enhancement and professional development needs.

Some of NC School Age Initiative's services include:

- Free program-specific technical assistance for program administration and teaching staff. This technical assistance can take place in-person or virtually through Zoom.
- Assistance with DCDEE health/safety regulations and licensing regulations.
- BSAC courses for new staff and SACERS-U CEU courses for programs going through the Environmental Ratings Scales assessment.
- Access to a wide range of virtual and in-person professional development trainings. These trainings are provided statewide on a quarterly basis.
- Access to our detailed resource guides and statewide school age publications.

If you would like to connect with the North Carolina School Age Initiative, or if you have any questions about how our project can help your program contact:

Jonathan Williams
NC Statewide School Age Program Coordinator
Email: williams.jon@swcdcinc.org
Phone: 828.450.9218

We look forward to helping you and your staff grow.

Upcoming NC School Age Initiative Trainings

For more information about our trainings and any support with registration please contact:

Erin Marley: Statewide School Age PD Consultant
Email: marley.erineswcdcinc.org

SACERS-U: Getting U Ready.

August 17th and August 24th

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Location: GoToMeeting Online

Credit: .5 CEU

Cost: \$25

Registration: www.swcdcinc.org

How To Be A STEM Superhero

September 8th and September 15th

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Location: GoToMeeting Online

Credit: .5 CEU

Cost: \$25

Registration: www.swcdcinc.org

Bullying: Every 7 Seconds

September 22nd and September 29th

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Location: GoToMeeting Online

Credit: .5 CEU

Cost: \$25

Registration: www.swcdcinc.org



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