Providing care for young children during a global health pandemic is a challenging task. How challenging one might ask? A recent study from The National Association for the Education of Young Children reported enrollment in centers across the nation is down some 67%. At the same time, about 70% of child care providers surveyed faced increased costs. In addition, the Center for American Progress estimated that more than 44,000 child care slots in Kansas would be lost without public assistance. Understanding child care professionals’ current challenges can help us to better support them as they support our youngest learners.

Early childhood professionals provide a safe, engaging environment where children and families can thrive, even in the face of adversity. The early childhood setting provides a healthy outlet for young children to create, explore, discover, and express themselves and the experiences they endure. These settings are places where educators can observe children’s emotions and behaviors, including some that may reflect adverse experiences.

Traumatic events may be experienced by an entire community or individual family units. They can include anything from a natural disaster or global health pandemic (COVID-19) to family changes such as a divorce or death in the family. Everyone will experience the effects of trauma in different ways. Some may need more time than others to process and work through their emotions.

Children can experience the effects of disasters or trauma months and years after the events. Some will express the effects outwardly through observable behaviors, while others will focus internally on their own thoughts and emotions. Examples of behavior exhibited due to toxic stress can include: difficulty sleeping, headaches, mood swings, and make-believe play about the stressful event.

As children return to child care and school this fall, parents, child care providers, and teachers should be on the look-out for children who are not adjusting or coping well from adverse experiences. One approach to meet the needs of all children is to provide a trauma-sensitive learning environment. These trauma-sensitive learning environments focus on social and emotional supports to help children learn how to self-calm, regulate their emotions, and focus on learning and exploring. The environment is built on relationships, trust, safety, and consistency. Each of these are important social and emotional supports benefitting all young children.

Additional tactics to provide support as children as they return to child care or school can include: using positive language, talking with your child, validating your child’s feelings, providing comfort to your child, and practicing coping strategies together as a family.

If you have endured the same traumatic experience as the child—a natural disaster, global health pandemic (COVID-19), loss of loved one, or even loss of property—you may share similar responses to the event in your own life. It can be difficult to care for children when you are not coping well. Reflect on your own behaviors and make sure you are not lashing out, quick to anger, or sad and withdrawn. If you need help coping, seek out a mental health professional, family member, close friend, or clergy member and share your feelings. If you have any questions or would like more information on family and youth development please contact, Extension Agent Tristen Cope at 620-382-2325 or tcope@ksu.edu.