

TOXIC STRESS IMPACTS EARLY CHILDHOOD

Adverse childhood experiences may impact brain development in infants and young children.

Toxic Stress Defined

An excessive or prolonged physiologic stress response in infancy or early childhood which may result in permanent changes in gene expression, brain development, and behavior.

3 Types of Stress

Positive Stress is a challenging situation that is addressed and resolved. Positive stress is conducive to growth, learning, and builds resiliency.

Tolerable Stress is a more challenging, sustained, or complex situation. With a foundation of safety, nurturing, and support the child is able to cope and return to normalcy.

Toxic Stress is recurrent, prolonged exposure to an adverse childhood experience or threat, or exposure to multiple stressors without relief, sufficient to disrupt normal neurological function and development. Without buffering relationships or protective factors, the brain perceives constant threat and is in survival mode.

Contributors to Toxic Stress

Constant Threat

The developing brain is constantly exposed to hormones related to fight, flight, or freeze. Healthy neuronal connections are pared in favor of threat response.

Inconsistent Routine

Chaotic patterns of eating, sleeping, and interacting leave a child anxious, fussy, and distressed. Lack of consistent caregivers limit attachment and bonding. Inconsistent response from known caregiver is confusing.

Limited Stimulation

Eye contact, expression, social interaction, engagement of caring adults to meet needs, later development of reading ability, all suffer when a child has an inattentive caregiver and a chaotic, stressful environment.

Unmet Basic & Emergency Needs

Food insecurity, unstable or unsafe housing, and, inappropriate clothing contribute to problems with emotional and social development, may contribute to greater illness, physical discomfort, and behavioral issues.

Hampered Cognitive Development

Disrupted brain development in early childhood may impair later developmental and cognitive functions, including self-regulation and reasoning.

Types of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Personal/Physical Experiences include emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; emotional or physical neglect; intimidation, exploitation, violence, harassment, and loss of caregiver.

Situational Experiences include loss of significant other or caregiver; witnessing war or violence, homelessness, displacement, and disasters.

Household Dysfunction/Trauma Experiences include substance abuse, mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and household member incarcerated.

Indicators of Toxic Stress

In Young Children (5 and under)	In School Age Children (6 and older)
Changes in habits, such as eating and sleeping	Changes in habits, such as eating and sleeping
Regression in skills or behaviors	Changes in school performance due to reduced ability to respond, learn, or process information
Heightened startle response or pronounced separation anxiety	Isolation and withdrawal from conversation, friendship, and activities
Repeats events over and over in conversation or play.	Acting out behaviors such as difficulty maintaining friendships, fighting or truancy
Easily irritated or fussy, difficulty in calming down	Difficulty with focus and paying attention

The Role of Protective Factors

Protective factors can shield children from the negative impact of abuse, neglect, and chaos. Protective factors build resiliency and serve as a buffer to toxic stress.

Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children of all ages help children grow to be resilient and healthy. Relationships support learning, social skills, brain development, and long term health outcomes.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: www.cdc.gov/ace/about.htm

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University www.developingchild.harvard.edu/

ChildTrauma Academy: www.childtrauma.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov/

For more information, contact Together for Kids and Families
<http://dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/MCAH/Pages/TogetherForKids.aspx>