

Childhood Stress: Toxic or Not?

Janet Thompson

Stress. We are all too familiar with the effects it can have on our own lives: sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, short tempers, the inability to be at our best with our children.

But what about children's own stress? This has been much in the news recently because of the release of an American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2011/12/21/peds.2011-2662.full.pdf> on the lifelong effects of early childhood (birth through five) adversity and toxic stress, including fundamental and lifelong changes it causes to the developing brain. It is a strong and necessary statement to policymakers and the public about the dire consequences of ignoring the adverse conditions that too many young children experience.

Many public health experts and commentators picked up the report and spread its message widely. Unfortunately, others turned this policy message into popular media features directed at parents, such as, "Your Stressed-Out Child," and "How Much Stress Can Your Child Take?" This caused already vigilant parents (we know who we are . . .) to become even more concerned—and stressed—about protecting our children from the potentially stressful experiences of life.

In short, here is what we should all know about early childhood stress, which the Academy divides into three categories.

Positive stress, triggered by events such as a parent leaving a child with an unfamiliar caregiver or a nurse approaching with a needle, revs up the stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline, epinephrine) briefly. The stress is mild to moderate and is not going to create long-lasting damage. Importantly, the stressful scenario includes the presence of an available and supportive adult who can help the child manage the stress. You probably observe this kind of stress daily when your child skins a knee while running, perhaps briefly loses track of you while exploring outdoors, is excluded from a game by a playmate, or is denied that passionately desired treat at the grocery store. In the moment, these experiences are not pleasant. In the long-term, though, they build coping,



problem solving, and self-regulation skills. Without them, our children would grow up ill equipped to handle the inevitable challenges of adult life.

Tolerable stress involves more challenging experiences. A serious illness, a contentious divorce, or a natural disaster can all provoke a more prolonged level of elevated stress hormones. Again, with support from a dependable and caring adult, the potential for long-term negative effects diminishes considerably. We do not seek out these kinds of experiences for our children or take their potential impacts lightly, but with our sensitive caregiving, we can ameliorate their negative long-term effects.

Toxic stress, at its currently alarming levels, is what prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics' report. Early experiences of abuse and neglect, often coupled with the absence of a responsible, caring adult, cause prolonged and frequent toxic stress. Family poverty, parental substance abuse, and household instability can exacerbate these circumstances. A young child's stress hormones remain elevated, which actually changes the architecture of the developing brain over time so that its stress management systems respond at lower thresholds. In addition, evidence suggests that it may impair learning and memory.

As parents in a generally affluent, well-educated community and participants in a high quality early childhood program, our response to this information is probably to breathe a sigh of relief. It is important to be able to put

our own children's stressful experiences into perspective. At the same time we do this, however, it is important to remember that we are exactly the people who can speak as informed advocates in the public dialogue about policies and practices that affect a broader community of children—those whose stress is at toxic levels and who are powerless to change it themselves.

For more detailed information about childhood stress from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp3/

To read about the widely publicized Adverse Childhood Experiences longitudinal study, which finds links between these and many problematic adult outcomes: <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm>