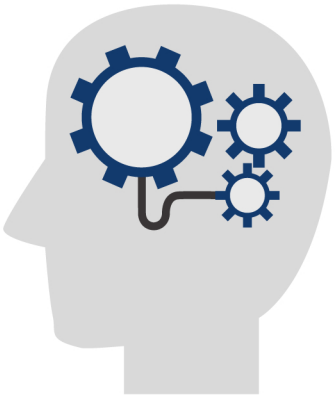
Toxic Stress

Definition

Toxic Stress is long-term exposure to high levels of stress and occurs when no supportive caregivers are around to buffer a child's response to repeated negative experiences.

Toxic stress can cause long-term damage to the brain and body.

Experiencing multiple ACEs can cause toxic stress.
Source: Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University



3 Types of Stress

POSITIVE STRESS

Low to moderate levels of stress that increase learning and memory

Example: starting the first day of school

TOLERABLE STRESS

Serious, temporary responses, buffered by supportive relationships

Example: losing a family member

TOXIC STRESS

Exposure to stress for a long period of time without relief

Example: violence inside or outside of the home

Source: Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

Why It Matters

Learning how to reduce or prevent toxic stress is an important part of healthy child development. This can happen through positive relationships between children and caregivers, helping children meet their basic needs, and nurturing their strengths and interests.

The small things we do as supportive caregivers prevents toxic stress in children's lives.
Source: A Guide to Toxic Stress

Take Action

- Review Handle With Care Flow Chart.
- For parents & caregivers, consider changing discipline policies: "What's Wrong vs. "What Happened."

Resources

- A Guide to Toxic Stress
- ACEs and Toxic Stress: Frequently Asked Questions
- StressHealth.org

Learn More

Scan with your camera to learn more.

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