

Toxic Stress: What It Is & How to Help Your Child Through It

WHAT IS TOXIC STRESS?

David Bornstein of the New York Times put it best. He wrote, “Imagine if scientists discovered a toxic substance that increased the risks of cancer, diabetes and heart, lung and liver disease for millions of people. Something that also increased one’s risks for smoking, drug abuse, suicide, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, domestic violence and depression — and simultaneously reduced the chances of succeeding in school, performing well on a job and maintaining stable relationships? We would do everything in our power to contain it and keep it far away from children. Right?”

Well, there is such a thing and it’s called “toxic stress.” For more than a decade, researchers have understood that frequent or continual stress on adults and on young children who lack adequate protection and support from adults, is strongly associated with increases in the risks of lifelong health and social problems, including all those listed above. Toxic stress never lets up.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE IN TOXIC STRESS AND NORMAL STRESS?

According to Dr. Jack Shonkoff at Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, and who coined the phrase ‘toxic stress,’ in the context of a reasonably safe environment where children have protective relationships with adults, childhood stress is not a problem because it’s temporary and “promotes healthy growth, coping skills and resilience. It becomes harmful when it is prolonged and when adults do not interact in ways that make children feel safe and emotionally connected.”

SOME POTENTIAL CAUSES OF TOXIC STRESS:

- Traumatic events like exposure to violence; neighborhoods with high rates of crime.
- Recurring violence such as child abuse or domestic violence, or threats.
- Experiences of war, terrorism, and natural disasters.
- Chronic stressors like poverty and the insecurity about basic needs such as housing, food, home energy, and medicines.

Toxic stress can increase health risks including depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and can have long-lasting negative consequences for cognitive functioning, behavioral health, immune functioning, and physical health. There is also evidence that toxic stress in children and adolescents may make it more difficult for youth to learn effective self-regulation, posing challenges for educational, occupational, and relationship development into adulthood.

Important ways to help mitigate toxic stress:

- Strong, quality relationship between parent and child
- Parents/Adults being responsive and attentive
- Encourage children to express their feelings and really listen to them
- Pay close attention and read your child’s cues
- Be emotionally available on a daily basis
- Communicate with encouragement; let them know you will keep them safe

To learn a lot more about toxic stress and resources, visit Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child at developingchild.harvard.edu Be sure to check out their Resource Library.

