

Trauma and Toxic Stress in Early Childhood

In light of recent news events, it is an important time for all of us, as early childhood professionals, to have an understanding of the effects of toxic stress and trauma on young children. We all experience stress throughout our lives. It is important to note that stress is a normal part of life and not all stress is harmful. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University classifies stress into three categories, positive stress, tolerable stress, and toxic stress.



Positive stress involves short-lived stress responses such as a slight increase in heart rate and stress hormones. Experiences such as starting a new school or a doctor's appointment can trigger this type of stress response. Positive stress is healthy part of development and helps the child learn important coping skills.

Tolerable stress elevates the body's stress hormones for a longer period of time. This could potentially disrupt brain development, but when coupled with healthy, loving relationships the brain has the ability to recover. A death or serious illness of a loved one, divorce, or an injury are examples of tolerable stress. This type of stress does not have to be life-altering.

Toxic stress results in the activation of the body's stress responses for an extended period of time. Toxic stress can alter the physical state of a child's brain. Poverty, abuse, neglect, and maternal depression are examples of toxic stress. Children dealing with prolonged periods of toxic stress are at risk for long term effects. High levels of stress hormones elevate a child's "fight or flight" response. When a child is in a prolonged state of elevated stress hormones, they may experience issues with the area of their brain called the "hippocampus". The hippocampus plays a critical role in a child's ability to learn and retain information. This can make it difficult for a child to learn or concentrate in a school or child care environment. In order for a child to retain information they must be ready to learn. A child cannot be "ready to learn" when they are constantly operating in survival mode.

"...always remember, the most important things that you can provide to these children are love and kindness."



There are children all across our state dealing with varying levels of toxic stress. As caregivers, it is important for us to understand how to support these children. As stated previously, one of the best defenses against childhood stress, is loving, supportive relationships with adults. Here are some ways to support children and families dealing with toxic stress or trauma.

1. Talk to the family. If it seems as though a child or family is dealing with a stressful situation such as, abuse, poverty, homelessness, etc., talk to the parent or guardian. If the parent/guardian is not ready to talk about their situation, just let them know that you are there to support them and the child. Be sure to approach the family with compassion.

2. Be informed. The following are resources to better understand children who have experienced toxic stress or trauma:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – NCTSN.org
- The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University – developingchild.harvard.edu
- The Resilience Project (American Academy of Pediatrics) – aap.org

3. Seek out training for trauma-informed care. Currently the following quality-assured courses are offered online through DIEECDP.org:

- Child Abuse and Neglect
- Supporting Children When They Are Homeless

4. Set realistic goals for the child. When planning for lessons and assessments consider the WHOLE child. The child may not be ready to work on alphabet or math concepts. They may need more support in social/emotional areas. It is important to consider ALL children in the classroom as individuals.

5. Contact professionals. Consider contacting an outside organization such as Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation for additional support. This organization can be reached at 302-256-9308. More information is available on Delaware Stars website – www.delawarestars.udel.edu/ecmh-consultants.

6. Become familiar with local resources. There are many organizations throughout the state that support families in crisis. See the attached document for a list.

References:

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (Harvard University)
Bremner, J. Douglas. (2006) Traumatic stress: Effects on the brain. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 8(4), 445-461.