

## What is “Toxic Stress”?

Stress is a natural part of life, for children and adults. But what is the effect of stress on children’s development? Is it ever a good thing? When does it become “toxic,” doing long-term harm to children’s brains and bodies? And what is the appropriate role of parents in making sure their children’s stress does not become toxic?

### I. Underlying stress

- Stress is a physical response to a threatening or frightening situation. At any age, stress triggers the production of stress hormones (such as cortisol) in the adrenal glands, and that triggers the body’s “fight or flight” response. That is not harmful unless it happens too often or for too long.
- Ordinary stress experiences actually can be positive in that they allow children to learn to manage challenging situations, keep going even when they feel fearful or anxious and build confidence that they can handle the ups and downs of daily life.
- Even with major stressful experiences in childhood (e.g. a bad accident or illness, loss of a loved one), the stress can be tolerable if a child has caring, supportive, emotionally available adults to help them move through the situation. Caring adults (especially parents) are powerful buffers against the serious long-term effects of stress.
- Stress becomes toxic for a child when it happens too often, for too long and in the absence of caring adults to support the child. Toxic stress has devastating effects on a child’s brain development, with serious consequences for the child’s learning and development. Research also shows a strong link between toxic stress in childhood and serious physical and mental health problems throughout adulthood.

### II. What does this mean for parents and other caring adults?

- Allow your child to build skills to manage ordinary stress  
*This means not being overprotective or trying to solve every little problem or remove every challenge for your child. Rather, be a secure base of support and encouragement for your child as he or she builds problem-solving strategies and skills to manage frustration and anxiety.*
- Be emotionally available, sensitive and responsive to your child’s cues  
*This means offering comfort when your child is distressed, staying calm and supportive while your child moves through the stressful time, assuring that you are there to love, help and protect him or her.*
- Protect your child from repeated or long-term threats  
*These include such things as experiencing or even observing violence, being verbally threatened with punishment or abandonment, or living in a highly unpredictable environment. Children’s brains are harmed by these experiences, with lifelong consequences. If you and your child are living in a situation like this, tell your health care provider and seek professional help, for your child’s sake and your own.*