

Understanding the Biology of Stress in Young Children

Stress is inevitable at any age, and that isn't all bad, even for children. Some stressful experiences allow children to strengthen coping skills, manage challenge and build confidence. But when is stress too much? And what can parents and other caring adults do to make sure stress doesn't reach toxic levels for young children?

I. Distinguishing between ordinary stress and toxic stress in young children

- The most important difference is whether or not the child is with a supportive, caring adult with whom they have a secure relationship. When they can access such a person this buffers the brain from toxic effects of stress.
- Three relatively common situations that leave the child's brain vulnerable to toxic impacts of stress:
 - The person the child relies on is suffering from emotional problems that leave that person unable to be the supportive parent the child needs
 - The parents are overwhelmed with their own problems, including violent arguments between them, drug and alcohol problems, etc., and the child ends up being neglected.... without a supportive, consistent parental presence
 - The child must rely on a frightening parent, one who is physically or emotionally abusive

II. What parents need to do – and what they need for themselves – in order to be that buffer for their young children

- Be the “secure base” children need, starting from day one
This means being emotionally available, sensitive and responsive to baby's cues and signals, letting your baby know he or she can count on you as a safe haven and reliable source of comfort
- Make life choices that protect children from repeated, prolonged stress
For example, witnessing violence in the home or being exposed to intense conflict does great harm to children, even long before they are old enough to understand what is going on
- Seek out good parenting information, strong support and a reflective look at your own childhood experiences
Research shows that these key factors help parents provide the sensitive care children need, even if the parents experienced toxic stress in their own childhood. There are good community resources to help parents build these assets for themselves and their children.