

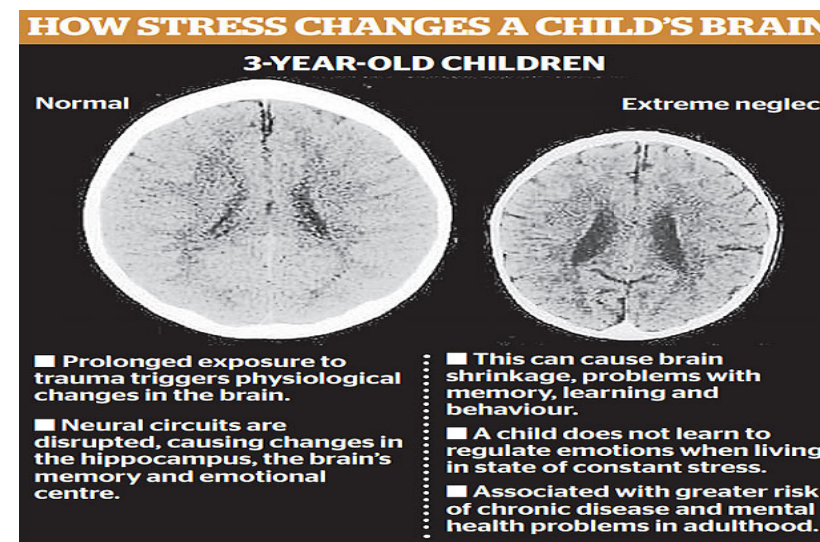
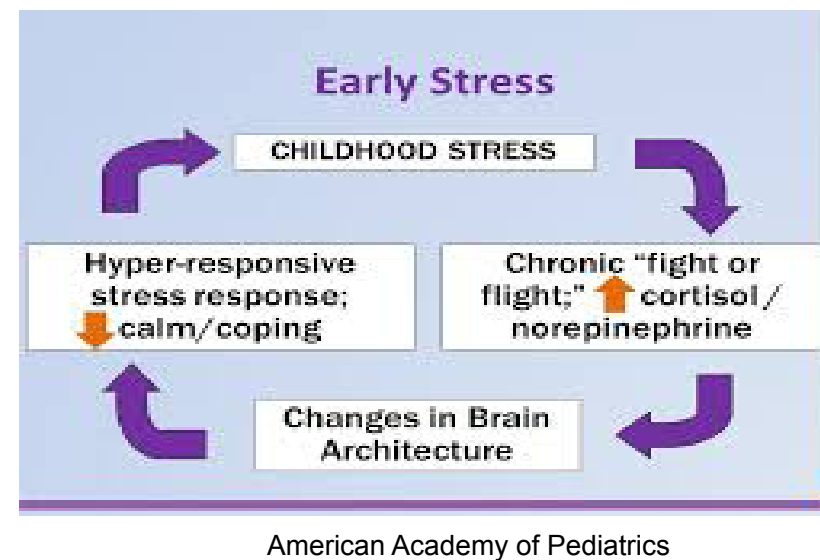
## TOXIC STRESS

One of the challenges of working with children and families is understanding that all of their experiences impact the child and their behavior—either negatively or positively. All families experience stress, which affects the children, but when families experience deep, chronic stress it not only affects the child's behavior it affects how they learn as well. As providers, it is important to understand this so we can modify our teaching strategies to accommodate for the different ways that children learn.

First, we must understand the difference between stress and toxic stress. According to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child<sup>1</sup>, there are three types of stress:

1. The *positive stress* response is a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. Some situations that might trigger a positive stress response are the first day with a new caregiver or receiving an injected immunization. These are situations that we all encounter and although they may make us nervous or upset, they are brief experiences and we come through just fine and maybe with some new coping skills as well.
2. The *tolerable stress* response activates the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.
3. The *toxic stress* response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.

When children are living in chronic, toxic stress environments, they have increased levels of cortisol entering their developing organs and staying there for prolonged periods of time. This can damage developing brain architecture and create a short fuse for the body's stress response systems, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health<sup>2</sup>.



<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/a-toxic-legacy-20130706-2pj5z.html>

Children experiencing toxic stress may exhibit the following behaviors and learning difficulties:

- Problems with emotional regulation
- Delays in cause and effect thinking
- Difficulty with empathic responses (conscience)
- Inability to articulate own emotions
- More impulsive responses to experiences
- Lessened ability to encode stimulus into memory (learning)
- Lessened ability to recall stimulus stored in memory (remembering)
- Lessened ability to inhibit behavioral responses (impulsiveness)
- Depression

As providers, we cannot always change a child's circumstances, but we can change how we teach to more effectively help children and families. Below are several recommendations from Upside Down Organization to help all children, but specifically those children enduring toxic stress conditions .

**Provide time for regular physical activity.** Play and physical activity is an essential nutrient of brain development and young children need 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

**Immerse children in language.** Children cannot learn to explore or explain their feelings and emotions if they lack the language skills.

**Focus on skill building.** Skills needed are behavior, understanding of rules in different contexts, persistence, and cognitive support. Activities for skill building should be interactive as this contributes to brain development.

**Enriched experiences and environments.** Highly interactive and enriching experiences and environments increase cognitive development and learning efficiency.

**Help children manage stress levels.** Provide time for physically active play, provide healthy snacks and meals, increase predictability by following rules and routines and provide warnings when schedules change. Also, teach children how to manage their stress and their emotions. Resources like the Second Step Curriculum and Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (SEFEL) are very useful and effective in teaching children emotion management skills.

**Allow time.** Changing behaviors and helping young children to manage stress does not happen overnight. It takes a group effort and, most importantly, consistency. Over time, children will make improvements and will be successful.

**Inform parents and families.** Explaining to families the importance of sleep, nutrition, and consistency in rules and schedules allows them to make small changes that will have big and long lasting impacts on their children.

