

Toxic Stress & Trauma

Repeated, positive interactions between a child and their caregiver have powerful impacts on the brain right from birth, but intense and negative experiences can also have a strong effect. While the types of experiences and stress can differ in intensity, they are a common part of life.

Negative experiences have many different root causes. Some of them are the result of a society's systems or institutions, such as racism, job and financial insecurity, lack of healthcare, community violence, and unstable housing. Some may occur because adults don't have the skills, knowledge, experience, or power to meet the demands of a situation, while other negative experiences are the result of accidents or singular, unfortunate events.

The impact of these negative experiences on our brains and bodies varies because of the intensity, severity, and frequency of the experiences and whether we have support. Not all stress is positive, nor is all stress traumatic. There are varying levels of severity, outlined as positive stress, tolerable stress, toxic stress, and trauma.

These types of experiences can be especially impactful for children and are referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). When a child experiences toxic stress from ACEs, their development and growth can be affected. The stress has affected them on a biological level and they may face serious challenges later in life. For more information about ACEs, learn more [here](#).

According to the Center on the Developing Child of Harvard University, **positive stress** is an event that is “a normal and essential part of healthy development.” It is a temporary event that raises the body’s response systems, and when it’s over, the body returns to a “baseline.” Positive stress can be a new or challenging experience, like a first day of school or getting an immunization at the doctor. Closely related is **tolerable stress**, which “activates the body’s alert system to a greater degree” and will often require the help of a parent, caregiver, or trusted individual to help calm and return the body to baseline. Repeated, positive experiences help strengthen brain cell connections, which can be accomplished when children have support in stressful situations.

However, when a child experience lasting or serious stress, it can cause a toxic stress response:

“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.”

With toxic stress, the body is not able to return to a baseline on its own, and when support is not available, the experience can become harmful to brain architecture

development and bodily health. Toxic stress can also be caused by trauma, which is defined as, “a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity.” Traumatic events are unexpected, often invoke terror, fear, and helplessness, and can happen to anyone, at any age. For children, if they witness a traumatic event happening to a loved one, it can create a similar response because they associate their own safety and identities with caregivers.

Thankfully, there are ways to heal from negative experiences, trauma, and prolonged stress. With evidence-based trauma prevention and treatment methods, the results from these events can be overcome. We can get ahead of future problems with strategies that have proven to work, and we can help people overcome past problems with treatments that we know work.

It’s important for everyone, especially children, to develop healthy coping skills and have support systems. Children rely on the adults and caregivers in their lives to help their stress responses return to baseline. This is not something they can do on their own.

Negative experiences will affect people differently. Not everyone manages stress and trauma the same way, and each person can learn to manage stress from the people around them.

There are many resources and programs available for learning how to build these support systems and coping strategies. The mission of [Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences](#) (HOPE) is to identify ways a community and care systems can provide children with more positive experiences, as well as support and strengthen families. [Pathways to Resilience](#) is another organization that promotes trauma-responsive policies and programs in every state and is a great resource for learning more and getting involved.

The IECC’s goal is to provide the most recent research and information in order to support children, families, and individuals in the community.