

Big Feelings, Little Bodies: Helping Children Heal From Toxic Stress

"Stressed out!"

We hear this phrase often in today's fast-paced world. Stress is a demand on our body's systems. We can feel stressed about many things—bills piling up, a never-ending task list, or the moments before giving an important speech. While stress is completely “normal,” it can become a problem when it becomes overwhelming and persistent. This is especially true for children affected by child welfare or adoption, who may have experienced toxic stress due to their unique life circumstances.

Types of Stress Responses

Everyone experiences stress; however, many of the children we are caring for have stress response systems that have become so activated that they still experience stress even when danger or perceived danger is no longer present.

To better support children who have experienced early childhood trauma, it can be helpful to understand the different types of stress responses: positive, tolerable, and toxic.

- **Positive Stress Response:** Not only is this response normal, but it is an essential part of healthy development. It's typically very mild and brief, helping children develop resiliency and coping skills. Examples include taking a test, public



- speaking, and participating in a sports competition, among many other things.
- **Tolerable Stress Response:** This response occurs when children face longer-lasting and more severe situations or stressors. This stress response has the possibility of turning into toxic stress. However, with the buffer of a supportive and caring adult, children can better cope with the stressors. Examples of these situations include the loss of a loved one, a serious illness or injury, moving, or the divorce of parents or caregivers.
- **Toxic Stress Response:** Predictable, prolonged, and extreme exposure to adversity, such as abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), chronic neglect, poverty/severe economic hardship, and exposure to violence can cause toxic stress in children. This can make their stress response system more sensitive and vulnerable.

Understanding these stress responses is crucial, but it's equally important to recognize how they impact children's overall well-being and development.

Impact of Toxic Stress

The various impacts that stress, particularly toxic stress, can have on children affected by child welfare or adoption can be lifelong. This is often due to the lack of an adult to “buffer” some of the extensive stressors they

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were experiencing early in childhood. The signs, symptoms, and behaviors children show due to toxic stress can manifest unexpectedly and be baffling. As caregivers, it is crucial to respond with patience and understanding. Research consistently shows that toxic stress can significantly affect children's brain development, physical health, and emotional and behavioral health.

Brain Development

Exposure to toxic stress can alter children's brain development in several ways:

- Change the brain's architecture
- Impact memory
- Cause difficulties with learning
- Develop issues with emotional regulation
- Impair cognitive functions
- Alter brain chemistry, such as increasing the stress hormone called cortisol
- Decrease the size and function of parts of the brain

Physical Health

Toxic stress also affects children's current and future physical health. It can increase the risk of:

- Asthma
- Autoimmune disorders
- Chronic pain
- Heart disease
- Sleep disturbances/disorders
- Gastrointestinal issues

Emotional/Behavioral Health

The constant activation of a child's stress response system can significantly affect emotional and behavioral health, manifesting in various ways, such as:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Emotional dysregulation
- Impulse control
- Anger/Aggression
- Hyperactivity

• Risk-taking behavior

Recognizing the significant effects of toxic stress on brain development, physical health, and emotional well-being is crucial. Fortunately, healing is possible for our children.

Addressing and Healing from Toxic Stress

Helping children heal from the effects of toxic stress and trauma is possible. While the brain and other biological systems are the most adaptable at a younger age, it's never too late to help children build resilience.

Resilience is the ability to recover and adapt well even after adverse situations. Many children who have experienced early childhood trauma and toxic stress need help in developing this, as their body systems have been "stuck" in the stress response. We can help them build resiliency and heal from toxic stress in several ways. The following are two key tactics.

Building Trust and Safety

Healing cannot take place without connection. One of the main contributing factors in healing from toxic stress and building resilience is ensuring that our children have supportive and safe adults in their lives. With time, consistency, and nurturing, the children we care for will begin to feel a better sense of trust and safety. Predictability, structure, routine, and co-regulation can help ensure that children feel safe in their home environment and with us as their caregivers.

Seeking Out Help and Building Community

Children with a vulnerable and sensitive stress response system can often show big behaviors. These behaviors can sometimes make us, as caregivers, feel as if we aren't giving them what they need. It is okay to reach out for help. This may mean partnering with school professionals to

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ensure the child gets what they need at school to help them feel safe and successful. It may also mean looking into therapy or counseling for the child or the whole family. There are many different types of therapy and counseling for children who have experienced toxic stress and trauma. Take time to interview and research therapists, counselors, and types of therapy. You could also look into a mentoring program for the child to help them feel supported by multiple safe and caring adults.

Managing Your Own Stress

Caring for children who have experienced high levels of stress and trauma can be incredibly challenging. As caregivers, we often feel overwhelmed, anxious, or irritable. This can be a sign that we are stuck in a chronic stress cycle.

In this chronic stress cycle, we feel the stressor, our body's stress response system turns on, the stressor stays, and our stress cycle doesn't complete. We are stuck with the "on button" for our stress response system, which can leave us with headaches, mind fog, irritability, and other symptoms.

What we need to do is complete the stress cycle. Completing it allows us to rest and recover so that we are ready to face the next day with regulation, problem-solving, energy, and focused attention for the children in our care.

According to clinician Jessica Sinarski, research shows seven ways to complete this stress cycle. Some of these activities may also be good to encourage children to do when they are feeling stressed out:

- Physical Activity
- Physical Connection
- Laughter
- Social Connection
- Creativity
- Breathing

• Crying

Guilt and lack of time can often make us feel like we shouldn't take time to recover from our stress. However, completing your stress cycle, whether it takes 5 or 30 minutes, will ensure that you can be regulated and present for the child in your care. Plus, it's a great way to model and scaffold regulation, coping, and healing for children.

Hope in Healing

Toxic stress and trauma can have long-lasting effects on the children we care for, but healing is possible. It takes time, connection, consistency, patience, and support, but there is hope in the healing process. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center has resources and support to help you and your family.



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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Raising Kids with Big Baffling Behaviors – Brain-Body-Sensory Strategies That Really Work*, by Robyn Gobbel
- *Raising Resilient Children : Fostering Strength, Hope, and Optimism in Your Child*, by Robert Brooks, PH.D. & Sam Goldstein, PH.D.
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.

Tip Sheets

- [The Wider Scope of Therapy](#)
- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Blocked Care: What to Do When You Run Out of Compassion](#)
- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)

Additional Resources

- [Climbing Out of Chronic Stress](#)