What is Toxic Stress?

Prolonged activation of the stress response systems in the absence of protective adult relationships.
POSITIVE: Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

TOLERABLE: Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

TOXIC: Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
What are Stressors?

- Poverty
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Incarceration
- Mental illness
- Food/housing insecurity
- Physical/emotional abuse
- Unsafe environment
- Physical illness
- Divorce/Break up
- Poor maternal education
- Job loss
“Children subjected to such stress may lack crucial coping skills and experience significant behavioral and academic problems in school.”

Teaching with Poverty in Mind by Eric Jensen
Brain Areas of Known Difference Between Low and Middle-Income Children

These areas include those responsible for working memory, impulse regulation, visuospatial skills, language skills, and cognitive conflict.

Toxic stress weakens the architecture of the developing brain, which can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.
Note: Effect-size differences are measure in standard deviations of separation between low- and middle-income 5-year-olds.
Effects of Chronic Stress

- Is linked to over 50 percent of all absences (Johnston-Brooks, Lewis, Evans, & Whalen, 1998).
- Impairs attention and concentration (Erickson, Drevets, & Schulkin, 2003).
- Diminishes social skills and social judgment (Wommack & Delville, 2004).
- Reduces motivation, determination, and effort (Johnson, 1981).
- Increases the likelihood of depression (Hammack, Robinson, Crawford, & Li, 2004).
- Reduces neurogenesis (growth of new brain cells) (De Bellis et al., 2001).
What Can We Do?
Research shows that, even under stressful conditions, supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress response.

From www.developingchild.harvard.edu
How Can We Reduce the Effects of Toxic Stress?

Start early! (prenatal/infancy)

Focus on developing safe, stable, nurturing relationships in a child’s life.
How Can We Reduce the Effects of Toxic Stress?

Expose children to safe, structured environments specifically geared for children with toxic stress

Teach stress regulation/mindfulness
How Can We Reduce the Effects of Toxic Stress?

Teach parents positive discipline and to respond consistently.

Provide support services.
How Can We Reduce the Effects of Toxic Stress?

What’s in it for me?
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

From the CDC:

Help parents/caregivers understand that their most important role is to:

• Keep their child safe;
• Give them a stable environment; and
• To nurture them (NOT the same as loving them). This is action, not feeling.
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

**Safety:** The extent to which a child is free from fear and secure from physical or psychological harm within their social and physical environment.
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

• Are children in safe housing?
• Are the adults around them safe?
• Is their childcare safe?
• Is there a plan if they aren’t in a safe environment?
• Safe talk is important
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

**Stability**: The degree of predictability and consistency in a child’s social, emotional, and physical environment.
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

- Is there a daily schedule, regular bedtime?
- Do parents/caregivers discipline in a consistent/predictable way?
- Can child trust parents to be predictable and provide a stable environment?
- No frequent moves, people not moving in and out of the house?
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

**Nurturing:** The extent to which a parent or caregiver is available and able to sensitively and consistently respond to and meet the needs of their child.
Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships

- Do parents provide physical affection/talking (with no strings)
- Do parents comfort child physically when upset or hurt
- Do parents quickly respond to child’s physical needs
- Is nurturing consistent
In the Classroom
Classroom Strategies

1) Recognize that a child is going into survival mode and respond in a kind, compassionate way.

“I see that you’re having trouble with this problem,” and then offer a couple choices of things the child can do.
Classroom Strategies

2) Create calm, predictable transitions.

Build a routine around transitions so that children know: a) what the transition is going to look like, b) what they’re supposed to be doing, and c) what’s next.
3) Praise publicly and criticize privately.

For many children, getting in trouble can sometimes mean either they or a parent will get hit. And for others, “I made a mistake” can mean “I’m entirely unlovable.”
4) Adapt your classroom’s mindfulness practice.

Free curriculum: Google “free Kindness Curriculum from the Center for Healthy Minds”
5) Take care of yourself.
5) Take care of yourself.

Adapted from How to Help a Traumatized Child in the Classroom by Joyce Dorado and Vicki Zakrzewski
Classroom Strategies

6) Frequent positive communications to parents
Classroom Strategies - Physical

- Arrange furniture to avoid congestion
- Arrange classroom to include an area for quiet time or a place to go if upset
- Arrange furniture to provide spaces for cooperative and individual play
Classroom Strategies - Groups

• Use the same signals (e.g., clapping, lights, songs, pictures, bells) consistently before and during transitions or to signal specific behaviors (e.g., everyone quiet, hands up)

• Minimize number and length of transitions; provide activities (songs, guessing games, etc.) during wait time
Classroom Strategies - Groups

- Involve children in creating rules that address noise, movement, materials, and interactions with others.
- Prepare children ahead of time for changes to routines or schedules.
- Use explanations and reasoning to communicate rules and standards.
Classroom Strategies - Groups

- Play games that allow children to practice paying attention, waiting their turn, and modulating emotion (e.g., Simon Says, Red Light/Green Light, and Duck Duck Goose)
Classroom Strategies - Individual

- Greet children by name and say goodbye warmly each day
- Have conversations with children, asking questions and allowing wait time; remember to incorporate important events in the child’s life
- Give positive feedback (verbal and nonverbal) for accomplishments
Classroom Strategies - Individual

- Play with children to model appropriate behavior
- Design activities to encourage partner work and play
- Group children with low social skills together with children who are more socially competent
- Present problems to the class (e.g., not enough balls) for solution brainstorming
Classroom Strategies - Individual

• Play "How would you feel if...?"

• Model concern for others; involve children in creating cards and signs for appropriate occasions

• Use conflict situations as "teachable moments" to help children practice resolving disagreements non-aggressively
Classroom Strategies - Individual

- Give positive feedback (verbal and nonverbal) for appropriate behavior during transitions, for following rules, and for remembering routines
- Respond promptly to requests for help
- Intervene immediately when behavior escalates
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