Did you know some stress is important? Stress that causes emergency stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, to be released while enacting your “fight-or-flight” system can actually be helpful and keep you alive in serious situations. There’s nothing wrong with this, and when used occasionally it could end up saving your life.

What happens when that same system is overtaxed with repeated, intense, or chronic stress though? These hormones that are intended to save your life could actually damage your health.

Children are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of chronic stress because of their developing brains and bodies. For some children, their “fight or flight” systems are activated so often that they stay on. This causes high levels of stress hormones to change the structure and function of their developing brains and bodies.

What can you do to support children who are affected by toxic stress? Read through this newsletter to learn all about toxic stress, adverse childhood experiences, and how you can make a difference in supporting children in your care who are affected. Who knows, you may even learn something about yourself.

Mary Jo, Sue, Schelly,

“Childhood is not quite the stress-free paradise that our rose-tinted memories might suggest. Children—even infants—can suffer from chronic, toxic stress.”
Dr. Nicole Letoumeau, University of Calgary

What is placing stress on Jimmy when he isn’t in your care?

Jimmy may “only” be a baby, but many things can be happening to him or around him that may be causing stress in his rapidly developing brain and organ systems. If he doesn’t have at least one caregiver to support and protect him, he will not be shielded against the effects of toxic stress. This will in turn affect the way his brain and body develop and can have lifelong impact on him.
Responses to Stress and The Body

There are three different responses to stress within one's body—positive, tolerable, and toxic. Each of these responses refers to the effects on the body, not to the stressful event or experience itself.

**Positive Response**
This is a normal and essential part of healthy development. Some situations that may trigger this stress response in a child are receiving an immunization or spending the day with a new caregiver for the first time.

**Tolerable Stress**
This type of stress response is activated when more severe, longer-lasting difficulties make the body’s alert system kick into action. Some situations that may trigger this stress response in a child are losing a loved one, a natural disaster, or an injury. This type of stress response does not become toxic if the activation is limited in time and supported by adults who help the child adapt.

**Toxic Stress**
This type of stress response occurs when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation to the stress response system can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems since they are rapidly growing in a child. Research shows that children who experience toxic stress are at an increased risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adults years. Toxic stress that occurs continually or that is triggered by multiple sources can take a toll on an individual’s physical and mental health for life. The more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse, and depression later in life.

What Are ACEs?

The three types of ACEs include:

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<tr>
<th>ABUSE</th>
<th>NEGLCT</th>
<th>HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION</th>
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<td>Physical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Mother treated violently</td>
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<td>Sexual</td>
<td></td>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
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<td>Incarcerated Relative</td>
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The ACE—Adverse Childhood Experiences—Study was one of the largest ever conducted to assess connection between chronic stress caused by early adversity and health later in life. It looked at abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction children were exposed to.

The ACE Study had two notable findings. First, ACEs are incredibly common. 67% of the people in the study (2 out of 3) had at least one ACE and 13% (1 out of 8) people in the study had four or more ACEs. Second, there was a relationship between ACEs and health problems—as the number of ACEs increase, so does the risk for negative health outcomes. These outcomes can happen in the form of behavior issues or physical or mental health problems. Behavior issues include: lack of physical activity, smoking, alcoholism, drug use, and missed work. Physical and mental health problems include: severe obesity, diabetes, depression, suicide attempts, STDs, heart disease, cancer, stroke, COPD, and broken bones.

Calculate your ACEs Score:
https://acestoolhigh.com/got-your-ace-score/
What Toxic Stress Does to Children

Toxic stress can cause the following in children:

- Living in fight, flight, or fright (freeze) mode.
- Short attention spans.
- Struggling with learning and falling behind in school.
- Responding to the world as a constant danger.
- Being distrustful of adults.
- Being unable to develop healthy peer relationships.
- Feelings of failure, despair, shame, and frustration.
- Oppositional behavior.
- Emotional dysregulation.—anger or withdrawal.
- Toileting problems.
- Sleep problems.
- Anxiety and depression.

Building Resilience in Children

Resilience:

(n.) The ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens.

As a caregiver of a child who has experienced one or more ACEs, it is important for you to help that child build resilience by teaching and supporting that child as he or she learns and develops the following skills:

- Understanding what is in his control and what is not.
- Setting goals and working toward those goals.
- Learning effective and healthy problem-solving skills.
- Having empathy for others and one’s self.
- Having healthy feelings management skills.
“The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.”

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

Try “Tipping the Scales: The Resilience Game” on Center on the Developing Child’s website.

Resources

ACEs 360 Iowa—www.iowaaces360.org
ACEs Too High—acestoohigh.com
Center for Youth Wellness—www/centerforyouthwellness.org
Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University—developingchild.harvard.edu/
This site includes excellent videos to watch about toxic stress.

Questions and Referrals

If you would like more information about the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation process or would like to make a referral, please contact Ivy Reynolds at ireynolds@cscinc.org or call 1-800-528-7222, or (610) 437-6000, ext. 2328.

To make a referral to the Early Childhood Mental Health Project, please fax ((610)432-5700) or scan both of the completed and signed forms listed below to Ivy Reynolds at ireynolds@cscinc.org

1. “Request for ECMH Services” form (Director signs please)
2. “Parent Facility Agreement” form (Director and Parent/Guardian both sign please)

These forms can be found on the Community Services for children, Inc. website, www.cscinc.org, under the ‘Early Childhood Mental Health’ of the Northeast Regional Key section. Click on ‘Early Childhood Mental Health’.