

Stress Management in Children

What is toxic stress and its cause

There were three kinds of responses to stress: positive, tolerable and toxic. These three terms refer to the effects of the stress response systems on the body, not to the stressful event or experience itself.¹ Toxic stress response occurs when a child has the extreme, frequent or extended activation of the stress response, without the buffering presence of a supportive adult.² Prolonged activation of the stress response system is damaging to the developing brain and has lifelong impact.³ Toxic stress can have damaging effects on learning, behaviour and health across the lifespan. Some studies showed that young children who experience toxic stress were at high risk for a number of health outcomes in adulthood, including heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse and depression.^{1, 4}

2. Toxic stress response can be elicited in children without adequate adult support in various situations 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. The extent to which stressful events have lasting adverse effects is determined in part by the individual's biological response (mediated by both genetic predispositions and the availability of supportive relationships that help moderate the stress response) and in part by the duration, intensity, timing and context of the stressful experience.^{1, 5}

3. Take the current social incidents as examples, children might be on the scene in action either by themselves or brought along by their parents, watch live or recorded broadcast in the news media or social media. Children are therefore exposed to violent behaviours, scenes of injuries, acts of vandalism and foul languages, all of which might cause significant distress in the children. In addition, disputes with parents/ adult carers/ teachers/ peers etc. who might hold different opinions to the current social incidents have been reported. As the situation has been on-going for more than five months, without appropriate adult support to alleviate the stress response, it can lead to toxic stress in children.

Lifelong adverse impact on children

4. In summary, when toxic stress response is prolonged or triggered by multiple sources, it can have a cumulative toll on an individual's physical and mental health

for a lifetime. The more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and later health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse and depression.^{1,4}

Prevention of damage from toxic stress

5. The most effective prevention is to reduce the exposure to extremely stressful conditions.¹ Parents/ adult carers/ teachers/ peers should prevent children/ students from exposure to unlawful massive activities/ sites of conflict/ scenes of violence, including viewing media broadcast of violence as far as possible.

6. Research also shows that, even under stressful conditions, supportive and responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress response.¹ Parents/ adult carers should therefore provide stable and buffering relationships to their children in need. Here are some ways that parents and adult carers can help them with:⁶

- Be a positive role model in coping with the difficult situation.
- Watch out for children's early emotions and behavioural reactions e.g. becoming clingier than usual, keep asking questions about what happened.
- Help children to express feelings at their own pace and in appropriate ways. Tell them it is normal and acceptable to have feelings. Refrain from criticising or blaming them.
- Discuss truthfully about the event. Be aware of own feelings, judgments and values related to the incident may affect how the children perceive the events. Avoid talking about events that may induce greater anxiety and distress.
- Instill sense of safety by comforting them and providing predictability through daily routines.
- Be connected with your children even when you cannot alter the situation.

7. Parents/ adult carers should also take note of unusual behaviours and warning signs of their children that professional help is needed, such as sudden and significant physical, behavioural or emotional change, new or worsening physical symptoms like decreased appetite, headache, non-specific stomachache, sleep disturbances, new or recurrent bedwetting, or somatic symptoms with no physical illness etc.; emotional or behavioural symptoms like unable to control emotion, heightened anxiety, social avoidance, new or recurring fear etc.⁷

8. While parents would like to support their children in facing recent social unrest,

it is inevitable that parents may be emotionally distressed as well. Below are some general self-help tips for parents who feel distressed:

- Meet your basic needs, e.g. eating and sleep.
- Although you may be concerned about the heated social issues, stay away from information of unproven sources in the social media and avoid real time or repeated exposure to news.
- Practise diaphragmatic breathing and/or other relaxation exercise.
- Share with someone you trust.
- Reach out for support from other family members and take turns to take care of your children whenever possible.
- Seek professional help whenever deemed necessary.

9. Last but not the least, adopting a healthy lifestyle, such as avoiding smoking and alcohol consumption, maintaining regular physical activity and healthy diet in the family would also help enhance resilience towards stressful events.

References

¹ Center of the Developing Child. Harvard University. Toxic Stress.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

² Johnson, S.B.; Riley, A. W.; Granger, D.A.; Riis, J. The Science of Early Life Toxic Stress for Pediatric Practice and Advocacy. *Pediatrics*. 2013, 131, 319-327.

³ Family Health Service, Department of Health, HKSAR Government. Early Child Development from the scientific point of view (PART II)

https://www.fhs.gov.hk/english/health_professional/OMP_eNewsletter/enews_20150410.html

⁴ Franke, H. A. (2014). Toxic Stress: Effects, Prevention and Treatment. *Children*, 1(3), 390-420. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4928741/>

⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics. Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma. 2014. https://www.aap.org/en-us/documents/ttb_aces_consequences.pdf

⁶ The suggestions are prepared with reference to the resources of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network: “After a Crisis: How Young Children Heal”

(https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//after_a_crisis_helping_young_children_heal.pdf), “Talking to Children about Mass Violence”

(https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//talking_to_children_about_mass_violence.pdf), “Parent Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children after Disasters”

(https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//pfa_parent_tips_for_helping_preschool_age_children_after_disasters.pdf) and “Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after Disasters”

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//pfa_parent_tips_for_helping_school_age_children_after_disasters.pdf

⁷ MedlinePlus. Stress in childhood. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002059.htm>