Toxic Stress and Our Children
Positive Stress

- Normal and essential part of healthy development
- Brief increases in heart rate and blood pressure
- Mild elevations in hormonal levels
- Example: Final exam, Playoff game.

Tolerable Stress

- Body’s alert systems activated to a greater degree
- Activation is time-limited and buffered by caring adult relationships.
- Brain and organs recover
- Example: Death of a grandparent, car accident.

Toxic Stress

- Occurs with strong, frequent or prolonged adversity
- Disrupts brain architecture and other organ systems
- Increased risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment
- Example: abuse, neglect, caregiver substance dependence or mental illness

Intense, prolonged, repeated, unaddressed; Child or family vulnerabilities, limited supports, develop. delays

Social-Emotional buffering, Learned skills, Parent/Child Resilience, Early Detection, Effective Intervention

Shonkoff and Garner, Pediatrics 2012
Positive Stress?

Necessary for healthy development
Moderate & short-lived
Tolerable Stress?

Stressful situations that could disrupt brain architecture, but generally occur within a time-limited period & are buffered by supportive relationships that facilitate coping.
Toxic Stress?

Chronic trauma within the context of a relationship

Personal or Exposure to:
• Physical Abuse
• Emotional Abuse
• Sexual Abuse
  • Direct or Indirect
• Neglect
• Abandonment
  • Loss of a loved one
• Domestic Violence
• Substance Abuse
• Mental Illness
Adverse Childhood Experiences (The ACEs Study)

- Kaiser-Permanente and the CDC
- Over 17,000 participants
- Middle-class adults, insurance, college-educated
- So, what did they learn?
Resilience Movie Trailer
“We remember trauma less in words and more with our feelings and our bodies.”  (van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995)

Prefrontal Cortex - Responsible for problem solving. Shuts down during and while remembering a traumatic event. Overwhelmed by feelings.

Limbic System - Responds to memories. This is the emotional memory center (amygdala). “Sounds the alarm” when in danger.


Am I Safe?

Do I Feel Loved?
Brain States

- Calm
- Alert
- Alarm
- Fear
- Terror
Where learning can take place

**Calm State**
- Emotionally & physically safe
- Supported by an adult

**Alert State**
- Child encounters something new
- Brain makes sense of it
- Learns something new
- Supported by an adult
Alarm & Fear States

What’s happening?
- Emotional response takes over executive functioning
- Reactive to people & environments
- Unpredictable in responses
- Anxiety
- Difficulty focusing
- Unable to rationalize

Escalation occurs when:
- Raised voice
- Shaking finger
- Harsh words/tone
- Verbal threats
- Ultimatum
- Abrupt movements
- Walking fast
Terror State

What’s happening?
- Acting out of brain stem (reptilian brain)
- Limited language
- No thinking
- Survival mode
- May be aggressive, violent or may run or hide

BEWARE!!
- Do not leave alone
- Remain nearby
- Have an outlet in place

DO
- Slow movement
- Calm voice
Trauma Responses

**FIGHT:**
Verbal or physical aggression
(hit, kick, spit, pinch)

**FLIGHT:**
Get away from perceived threat
(run, hide)

**FREEZE:**
Initial response to a threat/ body prepares to get hurt
(in a daze, wandering, unresponsive, uncooperative)

*Lizard Brain = STRESS*

*Fight, Flight or Freeze Response*
Trauma & the Brain

- Chronic stress = ongoing release of neurochemicals (such as cortisol)
- Increase changes the architecture of the brain
- Decreases brain function
- Decreases immune system response
- Impacts nervous system
What might we see?

Figure 6.6 The completed ‘Behaviour Tree’
What can WE do?
Goals for support

1. Children feel physically & emotionally safe
2. Children learn to identify, name & express their feelings
3. Children learn strategies for self-regulation
1. Physically & Emotionally Safe

- **Structured** classroom environment
  - Routines
  - Posted Schedule (visual)
  - Brief transitions
  - Clear expectations

- **A positive classroom** environment
  - Calm and warm voice
  - Positive language
  - Encouraging
  - Non-judgemental & non-critical
1. Physically & Emotionally Safe

- Building a **classroom community**
  - Everyone is special & important
  - Classroom jobs
  - “I Love You” Rituals (Conscious Discipline)
2. Identify, Name & Express Feelings

- Visual cues
- Books
- SEL curriculum
3. Self-Regulation Strategies

- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Relaxation Music
- Yoga
- Deep Breathing
3. Self-Regulation Strategies

- Incorporating a cozy corner
3. Self-Regulation Strategies

- Fidget Toys
- Sensory Toys
- Weighted Items
Referral Services

- In-school support (TDT services)
- In-home services
- Family Therapy
- Trauma Counseling
- Family Support Groups
Helping Families

- **Educate** families & caregivers
  - Developmentally appropriate behaviors
  - Behavior management strategies
  - Toxic Stress

- Recommend **family support services**
  - Counseling
  - In home services
  - Support Groups
  - Parenting classes
  - Stress management classes/workshops
Creating a Trauma-Informed Program

- **Recognize** the need
- **Ongoing Training**
- **Purchase Materials** to support goals
- **Connect** with community agencies
- **Non-judgement & Compassion**
- **Policy, Practice & Procedure**
The Good News?

- According to numerous studies...

*All it takes is ONE supportive, positive, caring adult to reverse the effect of trauma*
Every kid needs a champion - Rita Pierson
Connect with me

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