

## Stress & Brain Development

***Toxic stress interferes with healthy brain development.***

*Stress is a normal part of healthy development. However, toxic stress in childhood has the potential to interfere with healthy brain development. Supportive and caring relationships help to buffer the effects of stress for children.*



### Take it Further...

#### Learn about it...

Toxic stress and brain development (p.10 EYMH Common Message Paper)

Stress can have varying impact on the architecture of a child's developing brain.

Positive stress teaches problem solving and coping skills and is part of healthy child development. A child might experience positive stress when separating from their caregiver or on their first day of school.

Tolerable stress is a more serious temporary response to a stressor, such as a loss of a loved one or cherished pet. It can activate the body's stress response system to a greater degree with the potential for negatively impacting the architecture of the developing brain.

Toxic stress is the result of the prolonged and reoccurring activation of the stress response system. It can originate from [early adverse experiences \(ACE\)](#) which occur within the caregiving relationship, including but not limited to poverty, parental depression, intimate partner violence, abuse and neglect.

Exposure to toxic stress can permanently alter the brain architecture of the child and have lifelong implications for their health, learning and well-being.

Positive caring relationships help children learn to manage and cope with positive stress and buffer them from the impact of both tolerable and toxic stress.

Children exposed to environments of abuse and neglect before birth and in the first few years of life are at the greatest risk for compromised brain development. In the absence of protective relationships even small amounts of stress have the potential to derail healthy brain development.

Early interventions should:

- Teach families healthy coping strategies
- Eliminate sources of stress where possible
- Mitigate the impact of stress
- Strengthen caregiver-child relationships.

## Talk about it... Tell caregivers and colleagues about stress and brain development

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Learning to cope with stress and adversity is a normal part of healthy child development. Early experiences shape how young children respond and adapt to stressors. This response becomes hardwired and difficult to change as children grow into adulthood.

The brain develops within the context of relationships. Relationships can either relieve stress or be a further source of stress.

Children are competent and capable of managing everyday stress when given the tools and opportunities to practice healthy coping strategies.

For learning to happen children need to be [calm, alert and happy](#) – they must be able to manage stress and distractions. This requires a caregiver to be calm, present and emotionally available to help children manage their emotions.

Children do not always have the words to tell us that they are stressed so we need to ‘tune’ into how they are feeling and/or behaving.

## Try it... Moving from knowledge to practise

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Be aware of children’s stressors:

- 1. Physical:** hungry, tired and the physical environment such as too noisy or visually distracting.
- 2. Emotional:** strong positive or negative emotions such as extremely excited, mad, or separating from caregiver.
- 3. Cognitive:** learning new skills or problem solving.
- 4. Social:** getting along with others or taking turns.
- 5. Pro-social:** being empathetic and dealing with others’ stress.

Read the signs that a child may need help coping with stress.

Acknowledge their feelings – ‘name it to tame it’.

Help children to recognize when they are stressed and when they are calm.

Provide coaching and modeling on how to be ‘mindful’ when stressed and how to return to feeling calm.

Check in with your own stress! Take measures to reduce your own sources of stress.

Use these stress management resources/tools found on [Kids Have Stress Too!](#) ...they are free for downloading.

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For more detailed information go to [Social-Emotional Development in the Early Years: A Common Message Paper \(2nd Ed.\)](#), published by the Halton Early Years Mental Health Committee (EYMHC) to provide professionals with common messages on early social-emotional development.

EYMH Committee members:

Halton Region Health Department  
Halton Region Social and Community Services  
Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK)  
Halton Children’s Aid Society

ErinoakKids Centre for Treatment and Development  
EarlyON Child and Family Centres  
Community Living Burlington

Our Kids Network (OKN) and EYMHC work in partnership to manage the [Early Years Mental Health Toolkit](#) on the OKN website.