

## **Stress: The good, the bad and the ugly.**

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If I had a dollar for every time I have heard about how resilient babies and young children are to the stresses in their lives, and those felt by their parents, this article would have been written somewhere much more tropical. However, scientific knowledge has shattered this myth. It may surprise many to realise that stress experienced by young children and their parents can affect a child's brain development. Adverse effects may be seen in terms of brain function, coping ability, as well as mental and physical wellbeing throughout the child's life. Being too young to talk about stress, does not mean being too young to be affected by it.

All stress is not created equal, and stressful situations faced by children can fall into one of three categories; toxic, tolerable and positive (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

Stressful events that are ongoing or those where the child lacks adequate adult support may have a lasting effect on their brain development. Such situations are referred to as toxic stress. Due to the plasticity of the infant's brain, stress that is extreme or repeated may be especially harmful during infancy. For example, the effects of witnessing family violence have been found to be more severe the younger the child. Further, the more exposure a child has to witnessing violence, the greater the likelihood that they will develop behaviour problems. Children may outwardly appear to have become acclimatised to the stressful situation, and not respond as they did initially, but this does not necessarily mean they are no longer affected.

The next level of stress is classed as tolerable. This refers to situations where the stress could potentially affect the child's brain development, such as death or serious illness in the family, parental divorce, natural disaster or hospitalisation. However, these events tend to occur for shorter periods of time, and a key factor separating tolerable stress from toxic stress is the availability of at least one adult who can provide the emotional support the child needs to recover. Children need someone on whom they can rely and who is able to see the situation from the child's perspective and respond accordingly. This is not easy, to say the least, when parents are struggling with their own reactions to a significant event such as a death or the recent earthquake. As with any other aspect of parenting, perfection is not required, but a history of secure relationships and a committed adult able to meet the child's emotional needs most of the time will contribute to a lasting positive impact for the child. The impact of important adults in the child's world at such times is incredibly powerful and ought to not be underestimated. For example, in situations of natural disaster it has been found that parental responses have a greater impact on the child, than the degree of exposure the child had to the disaster itself.

On another level stress can be considered positive. This occurs when the stress is relatively short-lived, for example, dealing with frustration, getting an immunisation, or not having the sweets conveniently within reach from the supermarket trolley (I sure hope that marketing genius has since had their own toddlers!). Such situations provide the child with opportunities to learn and are an important part of healthy development, when they occur in the context of loving, positive relationships.

While the myth of resilience has no doubt contributed to far too many children left unsupported in toxic stressful situations, it seems that for some the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. My favourite example is the modern children's birthday party – the kind where every child wins every game, and every child gets a pile of goodies to take home. While these practices likely reduce the amount of tears shed at the party (and associated adult stress levels!) they also provide an example of a lost opportunity for children to experience and learn from short-lived stressors. While it may seem like a fabulous idea in the short term to avoid upset, disappointed children at all costs (I mean . . . why wouldn't you?!), the long-term implications of children with diminished opportunities to experience, and recover from disappointment, may be less positive. Rather than completely protecting children from ordinary stresses, they should be supported to learn through them.

In a nutshell, babies and young children should be protected as much as possible from extreme or ongoing stress (e.g. witnessing family violence, parental substance abuse) as this can cause lasting damage. When significant stressors can't be avoided (e.g. bereavement, natural disaster), emotional support from loving adults is vital and hugely important in terms of protecting a child from possible negative outcomes. Finally, short-term, everyday stressors (e.g. parental limit-setting, minor disappointment) are a valuable learning opportunity and children benefit more from being supported through them, than from being unduly protected from them.

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