

Developing brains need new experiences, consistency, and loving care in order to thrive. Unfortunately, not all babies and children receive this type of nurturing. Some babies grow up in chaotic and stressful environments. Children who live in unpredictable worlds, who do not have the opportunity to form a secure attachment with a caregiver, or who live in an unsafe physical environment live in a constant state of heightened stress. This severe, chronic stress can have profound and long-lasting negative effects on brain development. Buffering children from toxic stress and helping reduce that stress to more tolerable levels are important ways adults can support early brain development.

The key to lessening the toxic effects of stress on the developing brain is to provide children with loving support as they deal with the major stresses in their lives. Toxic stress can become tolerable in the presence of a strong support system. The following are some important ways you can help young children deal with stress:

- Be available and responsive. Children under stress are dealing with chaos and need a source of stability in their lives. One of the most important ways to buffer their stress is to be available when they need you. Be sure to respond warmly and sensitively to their needs; respond consistently when your baby cries; reassure children that you are there to help them; keep daily routines as consistent as possible; and prepare children in advance for changes in the regular routine.
- Provide a safe environment. Having one place where they know they are safe can make stress tolerable by providing a break when the brain does not need to be on high alert for danger. If a child is experiencing or witnessing violence at home, school or childcare may be a place where they know they will not be hurt.
- Let children practice managing small stresses. Some caregivers try to protect children from all stresses in order to reduce disappointment or sadness. But stress is a part of life. Children who are so protected that they never experience life's little ups and downs may not learn how to manage when things go wrong. These children may not have coping skills to get through more challenging stresses. Instead of always "rescuing" children from little disappointments, such as not getting a treat at the store, use these stresses as learning experiences. Help children find ways to cope, and reassure them that they can handle their disappointment. Experience dealing with everyday positive stresses builds children's competence and confidence for dealing with larger stresses.
- Encourage physical activity. Running, swimming, bicycling, playing on the playground, and other physical activities are positive outlets for stress, both for adults and for children. Be sure to build in plenty of time for active play indoors and outdoors, especially when children are experiencing stress. Try being active with children—it will help them recognize that physical activity is important and may reduce your own stress as well.

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- Model healthy coping skills. Young children learn many important skills by watching the adults around them. Pay attention to the ways you cope with stress, and work to model healthy habits. Teach children simple strategies such as taking a deep breath, taking time to cool down before responding, and listening to others' viewpoints. If you handle stress in healthy ways, children will follow your example.

For more information contact your Wildcat Extension District office in Crawford, Labette, or Montgomery counties or contact Chuckie Hessong at 620-724-8233 or by email at [chuckiehessong@ksu.edu](mailto:chuckiehessong@ksu.edu). Visit our website at <http://www.wildcatdistrict.k-state.edu/>

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