

Babies and Stress



What happens early in life lays the foundation for a strong, healthy brain and body.

- Our brains and all the biological systems we depend on throughout our lives start developing before birth. Billions of neurons get connected as babies grow—and form the strong or weak systems that we will continue to use throughout our lives.
- **Our genes and experiences work together.** Genes provide the blueprint - but it's the "serve and return" interactions (back and forth - like a game of ping pong or tennis) between babies and their parents and other caregivers that build their brains.
- **Our social, emotional and cognitive health is entwined throughout our lives.**
- **Caring, loving adults help build healthy brains and bodies.** Babies "talk to us" by babbling, moving their hands and feet, and making noises. When adults respond with the same kind of noises or actions, they "serve and return." This is how healthy brains and bodies get built.
Babies need parents and caregivers who:
 1. Pay attention to the child and learn to read the child's cues
 2. Are always ready to give hugs, kisses and cuddles
 3. Help upset babies calm down (holding, cuddling, singing softly)

When parents and caregivers respond to babies, they are setting the stage for learning, problem solving and self regulation—key skills for life success.

Stress plays a big role throughout our lives—and especially in the early years.

- The stress response is triggered when we believe that we are in danger—and then "stress hormones" flood our bodies to prepare us to face the danger or run away.
- When the amount of stress we experience is "just right," we have the energy and motivation to get things done and learn new things. The right amount of stress helps us grow and develop good coping skills and resilience that will help us bounce back in the future.
 - **Too much stress for too long harms our brains and bodies.** When the stress response is "on" and unmanaged for long periods of time, this can damage the neural connections, especially in the parts of the brain that we use to do well in school and in our jobs.
 - **Too much stress affects our immune system, our emotional responses, and how we can focus our attention, solve problems and make decisions.**
- Adults have to learn how to manage stress so we can have just the right amount to make us healthy and productive.
 - When pregnant moms experience high levels of stress for long periods of time, that also becomes stressful for the developing child. Prenatal exposure to long periods of high stress makes children more reactive to stress after they are born.
- **Babies aren't born with the ability to manage stress—so they depend on caring adults to meet their needs—and to help shield them and calm them down when they are experiencing too much stress.**

(continued on back)

Stress plays a big role in the early years. (continued)

When adults they trust are “there for them,” babies learn over time how to calm themselves.

When babies don’t have adults they can count on to help meet their needs and calm them down, their bodies are filled with toxic levels of stress hormones.

These babies may become hyper alert—as if they are constantly fearing attack. Or, they may “shut down” because what is going on around them is too painful to process—and they don’t think anyone will help them.

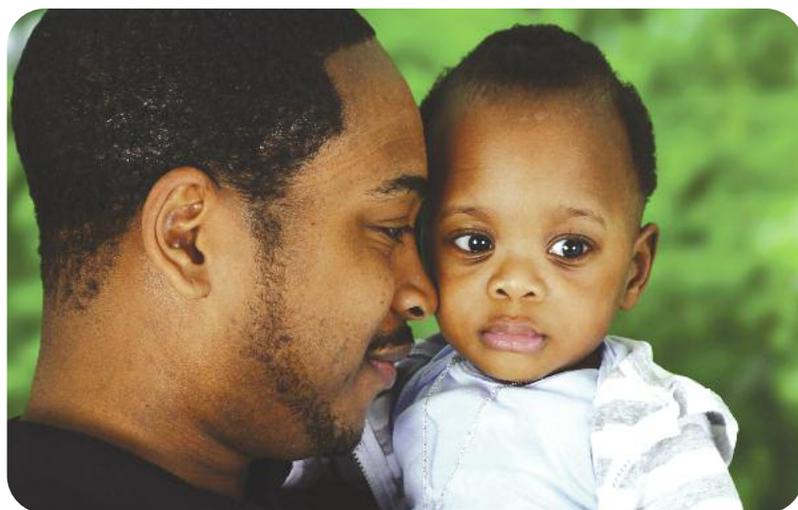
Toxic levels of stress weaken the developing systems—which can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, as well as physical and mental health.

- It is harder to focus, concentrate, remember things.
- It may be harder to regulate emotions, and more difficult to develop social relationships.
- It may be difficult to adjust to new situations—because the brain is focusing on danger and threats.
- Too much stress for too long also weakens the immune system, which can lead to physical as well as mental health problems.

For ideas about how to manage your stress, visit: <http://extension.udel.edu/fcs/family-stress-management/>

If you’d like to learn more about adverse child events (ACES) visit

- <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html> or
- www.developingchild.harvard.edu
- Want play ideas? Visit www.dethrives.com/QT-30
- Questions or concerns about your baby, dial **2-1-1** for **Help Me Grow**



Toxic stress can be reduced with interventions.

One way to prevent a child from experiencing such stress in the first place is to assure that every child has at least one consistent, nurturing relationship with a supportive adult.

- Our brains and bodies change throughout our lives, but because babies’ brains are so plastic (or stretchable—ready to change), it is much easier to build healthy brains during the first 1000 days of the baby’s life.
- Even in the face of toxic levels of stress (such as witnessing violence),¹ babies and children can thrive when they have adults who are loving and respond to their needs. This serves as a buffer and decreases or eliminates the toxic stress effects.
- Adults have the responsibility to shield children from violence and abuse.

When you become aware of parents who are unable to be warm, nurturing and responsive to their children, know that they may be overwhelmed. Surrounding the parent and child with support where they both can grow and flourish is very important.

- Home visiting programs and early childhood health care are “best bets” for helping families find the resources they need.
- Too much ongoing stress in a parent’s life may make it difficult to respond in a warm and sensitive way to children.
- Having friends and family you can trust is important for everyone.

Remember...

- 1 Pay attention to Baby’s cues—What does Baby need? Respond quickly and lovingly.**
- 2. Love, love, love!** Talk with your baby about how beautiful she is, cuddle, kiss, sing softly.
- 3. Manage your own stress so you are dealing with “just the right amount”—or ask for the help you need.**

¹Other examples of ongoing, unrelieved stress (adverse childhood events) can include extreme poverty, neglect, abuse or having adults who don’t respond to you.