Tackling the Effect of Toxic Stress in Young Children: 
Strategies and Teaching Tools for Teachers

PRESENTED BY MARY ELLEN DOUGLAS AND ANNAMARIE ALBERTS
TSR! Summer Institute, San Antonio  June 26, 2013

Thoughtful Questions

1. The neural circuits for dealing with stress are particularly malleable (or “plastic”) during the fetal and early childhood periods. True or False?

2. A child’s ability to cope with stress in the early years has consequences for physical and mental health throughout life. True or False?

3. What % of children have experienced a traumatic or stressful event in their lives?
   
   a. 70%
   b. 10%
   c. 40%
   d. 25%

4. Which of the following can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress?
   
   a. Good nutrition
   b. Behavior modification
   c. Supportive, responsive relationships
   d. Physical Activity

5. The definition of toxic stress is:
   
   a) Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.
   b) Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
   c) Serious, temporary stress responses buffered by supportive relationships.
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Strategies Involving the Physical Setup of Your Classroom

- Post rules, routines, and schedules; use real objects, pictures, and photographs to illustrate
- Arrange furniture to avoid congestion
- Arrange classroom to include an area for quiet time
- Arrange furniture to provide spaces for cooperative and individual play
- Set up centers to encourage children to work and play together
- Provide a physical space for conflict resolution
- Post steps for conflict resolution, using photographs or pictures to illustrate; provide tools such as solution cards or talking sticks

Strategies Involving Materials in Your Classroom

- Create big books of rules and routines for children to read
- Model appropriate use of materials
- Model proper care and cleanup of materials
- Use pictures and other labels to keep materials organized
- Keep materials easily accessible
- Establish clean-up routines and signals

Strategies to Use with Groups of Children

- Use the same verbal and nonverbal signals (e.g., clapping, lights, songs, pictures, bells) consistently before and during transitions or to signal specific behaviors (e.g., everyone quiet, hands up)
- Minimize number and length of transitions; provide activities (songs, guessing games, etc.) during wait time
- Encourage self-monitoring and helping others during transitions
- Involve children in creating rules that address noise, movement, materials, and interactions with others
- Provide variety and choice within the day’s schedule (indoor vs. outdoor, active vs. passive, quiet vs. loud, teacher led vs. child directed)
- Prepare children ahead of time for changes to routines or schedules
- Give clear, simple directions only when you have children’s attention
- Use explanations and reasoning to communicate rules and standards
• Use Center Management Charts to limit the number of children participating in centers
• Play games that allow children to practice paying attention, waiting their turn, and modulating emotion (e.g., Simon Says, Red Light/Green Light, and Duck Duck Goose)
• Discuss read alouds: Have children talk about characters' feelings and behavior that could or did result
• Use puppets or role-playing to model feelings and behaviors that could result during specific situations, and have children help generate and discuss potential solutions
• Label your own and others' feelings
• Discuss feelings that arise in certain situations and what situations make us feel certain ways
• When discussing feelings, focus on connections and differences between feelings and behaviors
• Teach songs and movements for expressing feelings
• Teach strategies for calming down (e.g., shaking out wiggles, deep breaths)
• Keep pacing of group activities lively and introduce new materials to help children maintain attention
• Assign helper jobs
• Involve children in classroom decisions
• Discuss read alouds: Have children talk about social situations and how they were or could be handled, including possible solutions to problems
• Model social situations using puppets or role-playing (e.g., initiating play, sharing a toy, taking turns, asking for help, sharing feelings, solving a problem)
• Play with children to model appropriate behavior
• Play games to show things hands can do instead of hitting
• Design activities to encourage partner work and play
• Group children with low social skills together with children who are more socially competent
• Present problems to the class (e.g., not enough balls) for solution brainstorming
• Play "How would you feel if...?"
• Model concern for others; involve children in creating cards and signs for appropriate occasions
• Use conflict situations as "teachable moments" to help children practice resolving disagreements non-aggressively

**Strategies to Use with Individual Children**

• Give positive feedback (verbal and nonverbal) for appropriate behavior during transitions, for following rules, and for remembering routines
• Check in with a child as steps of a new routine are completed
• Respond promptly to requests for help
• Intervene immediately when behavior escalates
• Provide a quiet place in the classroom for children to go when they need time to calm down or relax before rejoining the group
• Use guidance, persuasion, and distraction rather than power assertion to redirect a child’s behavior
• Encourage children to express their emotions honestly as long as they do not hurt others
• Validate feelings rather than inappropriate behaviors that result from them (e.g., "It’s ok to feel angry, but we need to use words instead of hitting; hitting hurts people.")
• Ignore inappropriate attention-getting behavior when possible
• Focus on what a child should do, rather than not do
• Provide warm reassurance and support during emotionally challenging times (saying goodbye to family members, show and tell)
• Greet children by name and say goodbye warmly each day
• Have conversations with children, asking questions and allowing wait time; remember to incorporate important events in the child’s life
• Get down on the child’s level when interacting
• Display appropriate physical affection (e.g., high fives, pats on the back, special handshakes, hugs)
• Give positive feedback (verbal and nonverbal) for accomplishments and for successful interactions
• Acknowledge difficult days with encouragement
• Use notes, phone calls, and home visits to develop a positive relationship with parents
• Play with children to model appropriate behavior
• Create opportunities for individual children to share about themselves ("student of the week," sharing favorite books, bringing pets, etc.)
• Encourage children to initiate social interactions; provide stems or entire phrases as needed; help them enter play situations
• Provide physical or verbal cues to help children negotiate social situations, including "stop/go" behaviors (using red/green signals if needed)
• Prime children for social situations prior to their involvement
• Coach children to consider the consequences of their actions; in particular, focus on the feelings of others

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