

# strengthening families

## research in brief: lifespan effects of childhood stress

This research brief summarizes the findings of: Middlebrooks, J.S., & Audage, N.C. (2008). *The effects of childhood stress on health across the lifespan*. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

### PURPOSES OF THE REPORT

The purposes of this report are (a) to summarize the research on childhood stress and its relationship to adult health outcomes, (b) to raise awareness of this research and how it can be used, and (c) to encourage violence prevention practitioners to incorporate the research into their work.

### WHAT IS CHILDHOOD STRESS?

Childhood stress is conceived as those internal influences (e.g., illness, negative self-perceptions) or external experiences (e.g., moving away from friends, parental divorce) that disrupt a child's well-being. When stress is experienced, a child's physiological stress response system becomes activated (e.g., stress hormones are released).

### BENEFICIAL ASPECTS OF CHILDHOOD STRESS

Although childhood stress may be disruptive, certain levels of stress are considered healthy for child development. When children receive consistent and warm support from adults, they learn to cope with and respond to stress in a physically and emotionally healthy manner throughout life.

### HARMFUL ASPECTS OF CHILDHOOD STRESS

Intensive and prolonged stress can overwhelm a child's ability to cope effectively and result in negative physiological and psychological health effects (e.g., disruption in early brain development, depression).

### TYPES OF STRESS

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has identified three types of childhood stress:

**Positive Stress** results from encountering a short-term, disruptive daily-living experience (e.g., meeting new people)

that is manageable with support from adults. Experiencing positive stress is considered necessary for healthy child development.

**Tolerable Stress** results from a relatively short but intense disruptive experience (e.g., car accident) that is manageable with support from others. In such a case, tolerable stress can be positive stress and yield developmental benefits for the child. However, if adequate adult support is not available to the child, tolerable stress can become toxic stress.

**Toxic Stress** results from an intense, negative experience that is sustained over a long period of time (e.g., child abuse and neglect) and that is unmanageable on one's own. When children experience toxic stress but do not receive appropriate support from caring adults, their stress response system becomes activated for a prolonged period of time. Prolonged exposure to stress hormones can:

- Impair the connection of brain circuits
- Lead to the development of a low threshold for stress wherein one is overly reactive to stress
- Suppress the body's immune system
- Damage the area of the brain responsible for learning and memory

### TOXIC STRESS AND ADULT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study demonstrated a strong relationship between specific types of toxic stress/adverse childhood experiences—5 child maltreatment and 5 family dysfunction variables—to adolescent and adult risky behaviors that resulted in adult health problems.

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors conclude, "Stopping violence before it occurs can reduce risky behaviors, prevent chronic disease, and foster adult health" (p. 13). As such they urge violence prevention practitioners to become more informed about the research, to share the knowledge, and to collect additional data related to adverse childhood experiences.