

# Parents building strong and resilient children



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Parents throughout the world desire for their children to be in a state of well-being and good health, and able to cope with the adversities of life. Although most parents have similar desires, some children will be successful while others may struggle through life, often making unhealthy and risky choices that can lead to poor health outcomes. Decades of scientific research has established that adversities experienced in childhood place children at a higher risk for long-term health, behavioral and learning problems. This scientific evidence is dramatically changing our approach to caring for children and youth. Today the question to ask is not “What is wrong with you?” but “What happened to you?” The field of pediatrics is always evolving to adapt to the needs of our infants, children and adolescents. In the late 18th century the focus was primarily on acute illness, infections, injuries, poor sanitation and premature death. Over the past several decades the challenges facing pediatrics also include increasing mental health concerns, the influence of new technology, exposure to violence, family difficulties, epidemic increases in obesity, substance abuse and currently the impact of toxic stress. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the damaging effects of ongoing trauma or toxic stress on mind, body, learning, behavior, immunity and even our genes. Children who are exposed to high

doses of adversity early in life have a higher risk of developing chronic diseases (diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, liver disease, etc.), obesity, learning and developmental issues, risk-taking behaviors (smoking, substance abuse and alcoholism) and mental health issues (depression, anxiety and suicide attempts).

## WHAT IS TOXIC STRESS?

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University notes that there are three types of stress responses which are listed below:

1. Positive stress response is a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. Some situations that might trigger a positive stress response are the first day with a new caregiver or receiving an injected immunization.
2. Tolerable stress response activates the body’s alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.
3. Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent and/or prolonged adversity — such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease



and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.

## OVERCOMING ADVERSITY OR RESILIENCE

Resilience can be defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties or in the case of toxic stress to return to being healthy and hopeful. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics Early Brain and Child Development, “The good news is that support from nurturing adults can mitigate the harmful effects of toxic stress by helping children feel safer and allowing their bodies to turn off the stress response. The antidote to toxic stress is safe, stable and nurturing relationships. A comforting adult can help young children turn off this stress response, and older children can be taught healthy strategies for managing stress and their emotions”.

## HOW DO WE START TO BUILD RESILIENCE?

Across the United States, multiple healthcare, government, education, legal, community and faith-based organizations are working collaboratively to influence policy and develop programs that build resilient children, families and communities. Pediatric practices

are becoming trauma-informed. In the article “When Things Aren’t Perfect – Caring For You and Your Children” (American Academy of Pediatrics) there are several things a parent/caregiver can do to help children build resiliency. Most involve the parent/caregiver first caring for themselves.

1. Take care of yourself physically (eating, drinking, sleeping, exercising, relaxing and attending to medical needs. Be an example to your children).
2. Identify a circle of support — Parenting is hard. No one should try to do it alone. Seek support from counselors, physicians, family and friends, faith communities and others who can help you see what you are doing well and to connect you with more support when needed.
3. Identify things you love to do and make time for them.
4. Identify ways to help you calm

down or handle stress. (Take a walk, practice deep breathing, talk to friends, or meditate and pray.)

5. Take time to think about what happened in your own childhood and how it could be affecting you now.
6. Be a positive influence in your children’s lives. (Spending time together and playing together can help with this.)
7. Learn about what you can and can’t expect from your children at different ages.

Addressing toxic stress and building resilient children is a collective effort that includes family, friends, school, medical home and community. Health care professionals can provide support and services, but only parents and caregivers can make children thrive. Ask your doctor about the many wonderful ways you can build resilience for you and your child.

## FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES SEE:

- The Centers for Disease Control [www.cdc.gov/ace](http://www.cdc.gov/ace)  
The Center for Stress at Harvard University [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)  
The Center for Youth Wellness [www.centerforyouthwellness.org](http://www.centerforyouthwellness.org)  
The American Academy of Pediatrics [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)