

Stress and the Brain

A Developmental Approach

The 5 Principles of Brain Development:

Brain development is...

- 1. Experience Dependent:** The neural activity generated by experience influences both the structure and function of the brain.
- 2. Cumulative:** Brain architecture is built from the bottom-up, so early experiences are foundational.
- 3. Integrated:** The brain is an incredibly complex spider web; deficits in one area or skill will often impact the development of other areas or skills.
- 4. Dynamic:** The plasticity of the brain allows it to literally rewire itself in response to experience; but this plasticity declines over time, making change harder with age.
- 5. Asynchronous:** Different structures and their functions mature at different times, making it difficult for children to learn or make good decisions when they are stressed.



Key Takeaways

- Adversity generates a biological stress response, but that response can be either positive or toxic.
- In the presence of safe, stable and nurturing relationships, adversity might trigger a positive stress response that is brief, generates motivation, and builds the coping skills needed to handle future adversity in a healthy manner.
- In the absence of safe, stable and nurturing relationships, adversity might trigger a toxic stress response that is prolonged, results in unhealthy ways of coping, and impairs the learning of better ways to handle future adversity.
- The antidote to toxic stress is relational health; safe, stable, and nurturing relationships are pivotal.
- Many addictions and “unhealthy lifestyles” are maladaptive attempts to cope with toxic stress.
- We can learn how to proactively build healthy responses to adversity.

Tips for Helping Children Build Positive Stress Responses

- **Make sure they feel safe;** children do not learn new skills well when they are scared or upset.
- **Make sure they feel understood;** help them to label strong emotions and to understand how those strong emotions might drive them to act in unhelpful ways.
- **Make sure they feel empowered;** help them to see that they actually have other skills and other ways to handle those strong emotions.
- **Make sure they remain hopeful;** let them know that you are confident that they can do better in the future.
- **Make sure they know what works for them;** when they are upset, do they engage in activities that are merely “escapes” (electronics, emotional eating, picking a fight with a sibling), or are they engaging in activities that are building valuable skills for the future (legos, reading, drawing, exercise, yoga)?

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