



The AAP is Committed to a Toxic Stress-Informed Federal Policy Agenda

Toxic Stress Profoundly Affects Children's Health Across the Lifespan

Toxic stress results when there is strong, excessive, and/or prolonged adversity that occurs in childhood without the buffer of stable, supportive relationships with caring adults. Toxic stress can be caused by many factors including exposure to violence, abuse, or neglect; a caregiver's incapacity due to physical or mental illness or substance abuse; or economic hardship and adversity.

Toxic stress affects brain architecture and functioning, altering gene expression and disrupting children's healthy brain development. This disruption may have significant and lifelong implications for health, learning, behavior, and adult functioning. As adults, children who have experienced toxic stress are more likely to suffer from physical, mental, and emotional health issues — including emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal problems. The economic and personal toll on individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole is staggering.

Building Resilience is the Key to Mitigating Toxic Stress and Promoting Lifelong Health

The alarming consequences of toxic stress must be prevented and mitigated to ensure that all children lead healthy, productive lives. Prevention and early intervention can successfully improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities affected by toxic stress by supporting:

- Healthy relationships with caring adults.
- Capacity for cognition.
- Motivation and skills to learn and to engage with the environment.
- Ability to regulate one's emotions and behavior.
- Support from educational, cultural, and community systems.

A Toxic Stress-Informed Federal Policy Agenda Promotes Resilience

The federal government plays a vital role in reducing children's exposure to toxic stress and building their resilience. A toxic stress-informed policy agenda comprehensively supports the prevention of toxic stress and the fostering of resilience through efforts to:

- Ensure optimal health, including physical, mental and behavioral health, through access to affordable and high-quality health care.
- Prevent exposure to violence, neglect, and other adverse experiences of childhood and strengthen the child welfare system to ensure children have long-term, stable, supportive relationships with adults.
- Promote academic attainment through the support of high-quality education beginning in early childhood.
- Support strong anti-poverty programs that expand economic opportunities and increase social mobility through: affordable, high-quality child care; tax policies that support working families; access to affordable housing; and anti-hunger programs that promote nutrition.
- Support services that strengthen families, including parenting and literacy programs.

A Call to Action

As a community of advocates and professionals who are committed to a toxic stress-informed policy agenda that includes prevention, intervention, and treatment for children and families, we call for:

- Federal agencies to apply a coordinated approach across programs to mitigate toxic stress and promote resilience.
- Congress to authorize and fund programs that employ a toxic-stress informed agenda to promote resilience.
- Pediatricians to engage with multi-sectorial community partners in the promotion and implementation of initiatives that support healthy, resilient children.