



When Things Aren't Picture Perfect

We often hear the notion that children are resilient. We hear it when difficult things have happened like divorce, violence or loss. These kinds of events are hard on children of course but for kids who don't have the right support, stressful events can become toxic and lead to permanent damage. Traumatic events are part of life and many people face high levels of ongoing stress so we need to know how we can take care of our children and ourselves when life is not ideal.

As science reveals more about how children's brains develop, we are seeing that chronic stress and traumatic experiences often disrupt healthy brain development and impact physical and mental health into adulthood. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study), shows us that diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, substance abuse, and others are much more common in adults who experienced serious adversity when they were children. The greater number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the more likely adults will develop poor health outcomes.

There are a number of different factors that play a role in how children will respond to stress.

Effects of Stress & The Body

The human body is designed to handle some stress. Stress like the first day of kindergarten or working on a big school project can actually be positive and help kids develop resilience. Resilience means being able to adapt and cope with stress in a way that helps you get better at handling stressful situations in the future.

Sometimes children's responses to stress can become harmful, especially without the presence of caring and supportive adults to guide them. When children experience a traumatically stressful situation or are exposed to a chronically stressful environment, the body's natural way of dealing with stress can sabotage the person's ability to function normally. When this happens, it is called toxic stress and this can lead to behavior challenges and physical and mental health problems.

Children can be protected from toxic stress through the support of loving adults, especially parents or caregivers who can reassure them and provide physical and emotional safety following a traumatic experience.

Parents Were Little Once, Too!

The experiences of childhood have a tremendous effect on adulthood. As a result, our parenting is influenced by the ways we were parented and the events that occurred in our own childhoods. Parents who experienced chronic stress and trauma may have trouble guiding their children through stress and difficulty. They may be quick to lose their temper or struggle with depression and health problems that limit their energy and motivation to provide care and support. Many people commonly use unhealthy coping strategies that create a chronically stressful environment for children, such as yelling, fighting and substance abuse.

Parents can do healing work and develop healthy ways to cope - improving their own life and offering huge benefits to their children. Counselling, physical exercise, meditation and practicing new coping strategies are examples of lifestyle supports. This self-care gives parents the wellness and awareness to support their children and act as a buffer between children and toxic stress.

Helping Kids: Healthy Parents – Healthy Children

Parents and other loving adults are the models that children need as they practice resiliency. Take care of yourself so your children will learn to care for themselves.

- Identify your circle of support. Parenting is hard and nobody should try to do it alone. Seek support from family, friends, counsellors, physicians, faith community, and others who can help you recognize what you are doing well and offer you support.
- Take care physically. Eat well, get enough sleep, develop an exercise routine, take care of your medical needs and carve out quiet time to refresh.
- Identify things you love to do and make time for those things.
- Find practices that help you calm down and process stress like taking a walk, deep breathing, talking to friends, meditation or prayer.
- Reflect honestly on your own childhood and how it may be affecting you. If this is difficult or painful, consider talking it through with a counsellor or a trusted friend.

Once parents have found ways to stay healthy and be well, they can provide better support to their children.

- Your children need to know that you love them and value them. Ordinary things like playing together and spending time together can help with this.
- Learn about what you can and cannot expect from your children at different ages. Use this knowledge to plan your activities. For example, a 2-year-old is not going to be able to sit still for long.
- When you bring your children along to accomplish chores like grocery shopping, involve them: “Do you see anything red?” “Please help me put the cans into the cart.”
- Model good behavior for your children. They look up to you and will try to do what you do.
- A good parenting practice is to stay as positive as possible. For example, give your children praise; try to notice the good things you see them doing each day. Criticism may achieve short-term compliance but praise has long term benefits.
- If something traumatic happens to your children or family, share that information with your pediatrician. Medical professionals can help you and your children get the support you need. The earlier you get support for your children, the easier it will be for them to heal and live a healthy life.

If you would like more information on this topic you can contact Family Centre and ask to speak with the Community Support Worker at 232-1116.