

# CHILDHOOD STRESS

## How children's early experiences can forever alter the way they think

Do you miss being a child? No worries and all play? While some may share the same sentiment as you, some, unfortunately, do not. Children, especially nowadays, face a lot of stress and pressure as much as adults. Family problems, social pressures, gender issues, and abuse or neglect are some of the causes of stress that a child may have. While stress can be tolerable, those who experience toxic, chronic stress early on can suffer its life-long effects as they grow older. Why and how can childhood stress affect them as adults? And what can be done about it?

There are different kinds of stress that all individuals, young or old, encounter throughout their lifetime. According to the National Scientific Council of the Developing Child (NSCDC), a multi-disciplinary collaboration that seeks to communicate the science of early childhood and brain development into public policy and decision making to support child health, there is positive stress, tolerable stress, and toxic stress that children may experience.

Positive stress is immediate and necessary for child development, such as adjusting to a new environment and overcoming fears. With the support of a warm, healthy environment, these can easily be overcome. Tolerable stress may negatively affect a child's brain development but these events only happen in a short span of time, allowing the child's vulnerable brain to repair, recover, and reverse its possible negative effects. Family problems, the death of a loved one, or illnesses may be some of these short-lived stressors that, with caring relationships, may help the child cope and adapt even-



This change may also be attributed to cortisol levels, one of the stress hormones. Normally, cortisol levels spike in times of stress, but researchers from Concordia University say that when a child is under this type of extreme, prolonged stress, cortisol is eventually produced less and less, altering long-term emotional and behavioral responses. Eventually, cortisol and other abnormal biological responses may lead to negative coping behaviors such as alcohol or drug dependence, adult mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, an increased risk for other illnesses such as diabetes, autoimmune diseases, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Plus, they may also have a harder time than others to manage or get through adulthood, from job instability to adolescent pregnancies and other life events.

Children's early experiences can alter their brain and body such that it can change its pathways and development, affecting learning, behavior, emotions, and even their susceptibility to disease and illness. This, however, is not to say that the effect of toxic stress on children is permanent and irreversible. First, each child responds differently to different types of stress that may be a combination of genetics, the environment he is living in that includes relationships, mental health, age, and gender. Second, constant, responsive care and guidance by a guardian or a family member can improve and help one overcome stress. And third, a combination of drug and behavior therapies can also help the individual adjust and cope better with different types of stress. Knowing how vulnerable children are, may we strive to protect them, nurture them, and care for them as they hold the future of our nation.



**SKINVESTING**  
**DR. KAYCEE REYES**

tually. Toxic stress is severe, prolonged, and frequent (negative stress that takes into account its duration and intensity) that, without supportive and caring relationships, may affect the child's brain negatively, according to NSCDC.

Examples of toxic stress are neglect, trauma, abuse, and violence. According to studies, children from age three to 12 years old have the most vulnerable stage of brain development. Physical, social,

*Children's early experiences can alter their brain and body such that it can change its pathways and development, affecting learning, behavior, emotions, and even his susceptibility to disease and illness.*

and emotional trauma can cause some parts of the brain not to develop their connections to each key brain parts, which later on could impact their personality (making them more susceptible to aggression, anxiety, ADHD, and depression). The toxic or severe type of childhood stress has been studied to affect brain size, impair the neuroendocrine responses (cells all over the body that receives signals from the brain to produce hormones including epinephrine when stressed), and form abnormalities in the limbic system (the part of the brain that controls emotions, behavior, motivation, and memory).