



Comfort Play & Teach



How Stress Affects Brain Development

In the first three years of life a child's brain is most vulnerable, and it is during this time that the brain sets down its architectural foundation. Positive experiences in the early years mean a solid foundation in mental health, while negative experiences mean continued learning and behavioural issues that persist into adulthood. This week, we discuss the importance of eliminating stress from your child's life.

Your Baby/Toddler (Birth to 36 months):

There are 700 synaptic connections per second that go off like fireworks for the first three years of life in your child's brain. These connections grow or are pruned away – “use it or lose it” - based on the positive or negative experiences your child is exposed to and these experiences lay down the foundation for her behaviour and learning for the rest of her life. Your child is very vulnerable to her environment at this stage and she needs positive and responsive care from you in order to be a happy and confident child and adult.

- Small amounts of stress can help your child learn how to manage his feelings on his own. For example, your child may have to wait five minutes for his bottle when he is hungry. This sort of stress is considered tolerable, but you can help your child during these times by speaking to him reassuringly, for example “I know you want your bottle, and mommy is getting it ready for you, you'll have it very soon”. Consistent supportive responses from you will help your child learn to process his emotions and will reduce his stress.
- During toddlerhood your child is becoming more aware of what she needs and wants but she is still playing around with sounds, words and gestures to make you understand. Not being understood can become stressful, since your child may interpret your misunderstanding for not caring. As long you continue to read her cues and help her with her words so that she can communicate her wants and needs she will understand that your relationship is still secure, and will not feel as though she needs to fend for herself.
- Children learn best when they feel safe and loved. When you take the time, every day, to get down to your child's level to talk, sing and play with your child, his brain responds in positive ways. The synapses in his brain are making strong connections that will help him communicate, socialize and understand who he is. Children who are exposed to language-rich environments have 300 more words by the age of two than children who are not exposed to talking and singing.

Comfort

Ensure that you respond consistently to your child whenever they are hungry, need to be changed, or are otherwise in distress.

Play

Get down to your child's level to play. Singing songs and playing games face to face will help your child feel secure and nurtured.

Teach

Read, sing and talk with your baby throughout the day. Fill your home with language to support your child's young developing brain.



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Your Preschooler (36 months to 48 months):

Brain imaging research tells us that children who have experienced neglect have smaller brains than children whose families interact with them all day, every day. All children go through what are called “sensitive periods” which are broad windows of opportunity for skills such as language, social interaction and movement. It is important that your child have as much exposure to these skills as possible, and that you practice these skills with her before the window closes and it becomes more difficult to teach your child how to communicate and what is socially appropriate.

- Sometimes stress is impossible to avoid. Tolerable stress is when, for example, a loved one has passed away or has moved away and is therefore no longer a part of you and your child’s life. While this can be a stressful time that may last weeks, potentially months, it is imperative that another trusted and responsive parent or other adult in your child’s life step in. While it may take some time to build and strengthen a new relationship, it is important that your child has access to many loving and supportive people that will be there to respond to his needs so that his brain can continue to learn based on the positive relationships he has in his world.
- Having positive relationships in your child’s life builds resiliency; the ability to “bounce back” from adverse or negative experiences. Because we cannot always avoid the stressors in our lives, we need to counteract their effects by building as many positive relationships and experiences as possible. This means building a network of family and friends to buffer the effects of stress. When your child is overly stressed a hormone called cortisol is released in the brain and begins to kill brain cells. If the hormone is released frequently and for long periods of time, the effects can be damaging. This greatly affects your child’s ability to develop and learn, and at a time when your child’s brain is so vulnerable to the environment, the damage done may not be reversible. Protecting your child from chronic stressors can go a long way to preventing this damage.

Comfort

The positive support of other responsive adults can help your child build resiliency when faced with stress.

Play

Set up play dates with other children in your community. These friends will be a source of joy for your child to help him overcome his stressors.

Teach

Let your child know that they can take some space if they are upset. Set up a space in the house that is quiet with lots of things they like and find comforting such as books, pillows and toys.