

## Stress in childhood can lead to diseases in adulthood

July 17, 2018

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**Article type:** [Parent Plus](#)

**Topics:** [Psychiatry/Psychology](#)

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Have you ever wondered why one child can grow up in hard times and become successful while another child struggles throughout life?

How a child handles extreme or repeated stressors depends on his genetics and the world around him, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

### **What is toxic stress?**

Positive stress responses are short and healthy. Toxic stress is the body's response to extreme or repeated stressors. Safe, stable and nurturing relationships help a child's body turn off the stress response quickly.

Ongoing toxic stress responses change a child's genes and brain. The body does this to prepare for future stress. These changes might help in life or death situations, according to Andrew S. Garner, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, a pediatric expert on toxic stress. However, these same changes may lead to learning and behavior problems and diseases like obesity and diabetes.

### **Why does stress affect some kids more than others?**

Some children's genes make them more sensitive to the world around them. In stressful situations, they may be easily overwhelmed and react angrily, anxiously or impulsively. Other children are not as sensitive. They might not be as reactive to the stress around them.

Safe, stable and nurturing relationships teach sensitive children how to deal with this emotional energy by directing it into a positive outlet like exercise or hobbies. Just as a child who struggles with math deserves some extra help, Dr. Garner says a child who struggles with strong emotions also should get some extra guidance.

### **How do I know if my child has toxic stress?**

Toxic stress responses may look different at different ages.

Dr. Garner looks for crying, fussiness and clinginess in infants. School-age kids might have trouble with learning or focus. Others have problems with sleeping and eating and constipation or diarrhea. Teen patients might be irritable, explosive, anxious or withdrawn.

Abuse, neglect and family or household challenges can set off toxic stress responses. Kids who never see their professionally successful parents are just as likely to be affected as kids who are separated from their families (see <http://bit.ly/2tPFVSP>).

Dr. Garner explained, "If the parents are not around or are always in survival mode, then the kids are more likely to be in survival mode as well."

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