



03 Heal: Resources and Support

Patient Tools and Informational Handouts

References

For [resources on ACEs and trauma-informed care](https://www.acesaware.org/resources),
visit [ACESAware.org/resources](https://www.acesaware.org/resources).

PATIENT TOOLS AND INFORMATIONAL HANDOUTS

This section lists key resources including patient self-care tools and educational handouts. Resources marked with an asterisk (*) are presented in full below in the order in which they are listed.

For additional resources, visit the [ACEs Aware website](https://www.acesaware.org/resources) at [ACEsAware.org/resources](https://www.acesaware.org/resources).

Resources that Providers Can Offer Adult Patients

[Self-Care Tool for Adults – ACEs Aware*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Self-Care-Tool-for-Adults.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Self-Care-Tool-for-Adults.pdf>

An ACEs Aware-developed tool that patients can use in developing a self-care plan to enhance well-being and decrease toxic stress.

[Parent Handout: Parenting with ACEs – The Center for Youth Wellness*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/10-Parenting-with-ACEs-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/10-Parenting-with-ACEs-English.pdf>

A patient handout on toxic stress, how it can make parenting harder, and ways to reduce its impacts.

[Parent Handout: Reducing the Effects on Toxic Stress – The Center for Youth Wellness*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/3-How-to-Reduce-the-Effects-of-ACEs-and-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/3-How-to-Reduce-the-Effects-of-ACEs-and-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf>

A handout for parents that offers tips on ways to reduce the effects of toxic stress on children.

Provider Resources / Support

[Tips for Providers: ACE Screening – The Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO to THREE](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/11-Providing-Anticipatory-Guidance-for-ACEs-Screening-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/11-Providing-Anticipatory-Guidance-for-ACEs-Screening-English.pdf>

Tips for providers on ways to approach families when screening for ACEs.

Resources that Providers Can Offer Pediatric Patients / Families

[Sample School Health Letter – ACEs Aware*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ACEs-Aware-School-Health-Letter-1.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ACEs-Aware-School-Health-Letter-1.pdf>

An ACEs Aware-developed sample school letter from a pediatrician to a school regarding a patient's toxic stress symptoms and treatment plan.

[Self-Care Tool for Pediatrics – ACEs Aware](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Self-Care-Tool-for-Pediatrics.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Self-Care-Tool-for-Pediatrics.pdf>

An ACEs Aware-developed tool for children and their families to use in developing a self-care plan to enhance well-being and decrease toxic stress.

[Patient Handout: What are ACEs and Why Do They Matter? – The Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/1-What-are-ACEs-and-Why-Do-They-Matter-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/1-What-are-ACEs-and-Why-Do-They-Matter-English.pdf>

A patient handout that describes the definition and importance of ACEs to health, and ways to buffer their potential negative impacts on health.

[Patient Handout: What is Toxic Stress? – The Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2-What-is-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2-What-is-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf>

A patient handout that describes the definition of toxic stress, the effects it has on the body, and ways to reduce these effects.

[Parent Handout: How to Reduce the Effects of ACEs and Toxic Stress – The Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/3-How-to-Reduce-the-Effects-of-ACEs-and-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/3-How-to-Reduce-the-Effects-of-ACEs-and-Toxic-Stress-English.pdf>

A handout for parents that provides tips on ways to reduce the effects of toxic stress on children.

The Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE patient handouts on the six pillars of toxic stress intervention:

[The Benefit of Supportive Relationships*](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/8-The-Benefit-of-Supportive-Relationships-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/8-The-Benefit-of-Supportive-Relationships-English.pdf>

A patient handout for families about the importance of maintaining supportive relationships and tips to do so.

[Using Mindfulness](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/9-Using-Mindfulness-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/9-Using-Mindfulness-English.pdf>

A patient handout about using mindfulness as a tool to reduce toxic stress.

[Improving Mental Health](https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/7-Improving-Mental-Health-English.pdf)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/7-Improving-Mental-Health-English.pdf>

A patient handout on ways to improve children’s mental health.

[Good Sleep Habits](#)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/5-Good-Sleep-Habits-English.pdf>

A patient handout on how to improve children's sleep habits.

[Promoting Exercise](#)

<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/6-Promoting-Exercise-English.pdf>

A patient handout on ways of promoting exercise to children.



ACEs Aware Self-Care Tool for Adults

When a person has experienced significant Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), their body may make more or less stress hormones than is healthy. This can lead to physical and/or mental health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease, anxiety, smoking, or unhealthy use of alcohol or other drugs. Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships can protect our brains and bodies from the harmful effects of stress and adversity. The following tips can help you manage your stress response. Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, restful sleep, practicing mindfulness, building social connections, and getting mental health support can help decrease stress hormones and improve health. Here are some goals you can set to support your health. *[Check the goals that you are choosing for yourself!]*

Healthy relationships. I've set a goal of...

- Spending more high-quality time together with loved ones, such as:
 - Having regular meals together
 - Having regular “no electronics” time for us to talk and connect with each other
- Making time to see friends and create a healthy support system for myself
- Connecting regularly with members of my community to build social connections
- Asking for help if I feel physically or emotionally unsafe in my relationships
 - The National Domestic Violence hotline is **800-799-SAFE (7233)**
 - The National Sexual Assault hotline is **800-656-HOPE (4673)**
 - To reach a crisis text line, **text HOME to 741-741**
- Create your own goal: _____

Exercise. I've set a goal of...

- Limiting screen time to less than __ hours per day
- Walking at least 30 minutes every day
- Finding a type of exercise that I enjoy and doing it regularly
- Create your own goal: _____

Nutrition. I've set a goal of...

- Eating a healthy breakfast daily (with protein, whole grains, and/or fruit)
- Drinking water instead of juice or soda
- Limiting my alcohol consumption



- Eating at least 5 vegetables and/or fruits every day
- Choosing whole wheat bread and brown rice instead of white bread or rice
- Create your own goal: _____
- Sleep.** I've set a goal of...
 - Being consistent about going to bed at the same time every night
 - Creating a cool, calm, and quiet place for sleep, and a relaxing bedtime routine
 - Using mindfulness or other stress reduction tools if worry is keeping me up at night
 - Turning off electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed
 - Create your own goal: _____
- Mindfulness.** I've set a goal of...
 - Taking moments throughout the day to notice how I'm feeling, both physically and emotionally
 - Practicing mindful breathing or other calming technique(s) during stressful situations
 - Finding at least one thing to be thankful for each day
 - Creating a regular routine of prayer, meditation, and/or yoga
 - Downloading a mindfulness app and doing a mindfulness practice 20 minutes per day
 - Create your own goal: _____
- Mental health.** I've set a goal of...
 - Learning more about mental health and/or substance use services (e.g., counseling, groups, medications,)
 - Identifying a local mental health professional or support group.
 - Scheduling an appointment with a mental health professional
 - If I am feeling like I am in crisis, I will get help
 - The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is **800-273-TALK (8255)**
 - To reach a crisis text line, **text HOME to 741-741**
 - Create your own goal: _____

Here are some other goals that you can set to help yourself be healthier.

- Self-Care.** I've set a goal of...



- Limiting screen/social media time to less than __ hours per day
- Making a plan for what to do when I'm feeling stressed out, angry, or overwhelmed
- Planning with my partner, friends, or family to get support when I need it
- Making regular appointments with my medical provider(s), including for preventive care
- Identifying my strengths and learning more about building resilience
- Create your own goal: _____

For more information, please visit:

From **ACEs Aware**: <https://www.acesaware.org/heal/resources/>

Mental Health and Substance Use:

- **The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** <https://www.nami.org/help>
 - 1-800-950-NAMI (6264); [Crisis Text Line](#) – **Text HOME to 741-741**
- **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Facilities Locator:** <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/locator>



Parenting with ACEs



As an adult, you may still feel the effects of your own Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). What does this mean for your own health? This depends on how many ACEs you experienced as a child. It *also* depends on whether you've had certain positive experiences that help reduce the effects of stress. These positive experiences are known as "protective factors." Did a friend, family member, or mental health care professional provide support during your childhood? Do you have a good support system in place now? These experiences help reduce the effects of ACEs. The impact of ACEs also depends on factors such as how you personally manage stress. Let's start by talking about how stress works.

The stress response

Your body's stress response is designed to help you survive. When you sense danger or any kind of threat, your body's natural reaction is to increase blood pressure and heart rate so you have the energy to run or fight back. Another reaction is to freeze and shut down. These reactions are your body's way of trying to keep you safe. When used from time to time, these stress responses work well. However, when you experience frequent or severe stress during childhood, your body may learn to respond to small problems as if they were big ones. This could be why little things, even a toddler's tantrum or spilled milk, can feel overwhelming. It can also explain why you may sometimes feel anxious and threatened even when in a safe and calm place. When you're only a little stressed, you may feel alert, aware, and able to cope well. But when you become overly stressed, you may feel panicked and anxious. You may also feel numb, exhausted, or emotionally drained.

Parenting is demanding, and it can easily trigger this stress response. Very simply, because of how brains and bodies react to stress, it is harder to process information when stress levels are too high. You may experience feelings of *stress overload* such as:

- difficulty calming down
- a quicker-than-normal temper and feelings of impatience
- difficulty thinking logically
- a limited ability to "read" others and judge the needs of your children
- difficulty modeling good skills and behavior for your children.



Breaking the ACEs Cycle

Some adults who had ACEs when they were children have a harder time providing a safe and nurturing environment for themselves and their children. In addition, being a parent with ACEs can increase the risk that your children will also have ACEs. It's important to know about this connection. Ensuring that you and your child live in a safe, trusting and healthy environment is one of the most important steps you can take to protect your child. If you need resources, your health care provider or a mental health professional can help.

The good news!

Although people with ACEs may be at higher risk for many health issues, it's never too late to get support! Because bodies and brains are constantly growing and changing, things you do to improve your health *today* can make a *big difference* over time! Learning healthy ways to cope with stress and build resilience can help. This skill-building means developing healthy habits for stress management now that improve your ability to handle difficult situations *in the future*. Also, learning about what's age-appropriate for your child can give you perspective when his behavior is challenging.



How to reduce the effects of ACEs

Many lifestyle changes can help reduce the effects of ACEs. Relationships with other supportive adults can help your brain and body *turn down the stress response* and build resilience. Making time to relax, engage in a fulfilling hobby, or participate in a fun activity can help a lot, too! Good sleep habits, healthy eating, and regular exercise are other important tools to manage stress. Mindfulness practices can also help. Some parents find it helpful to seek out mental health professionals for their own exposure to ACEs and trauma. Talk to your own doctor about the health risks associated with ACEs at your next medical visit. Together, these protective factors can help *improve the health and well-being* of your whole family!

SOURCES

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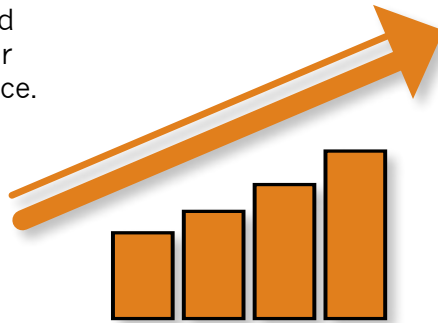
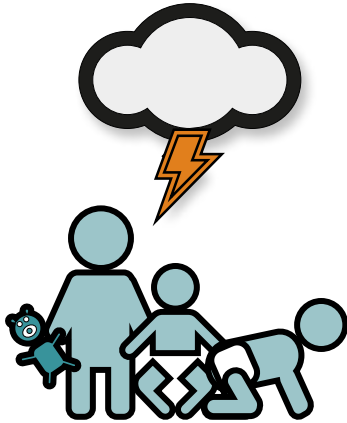
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WHAT ARE ACES?

AND HOW DO THEY RELATE TO TOXIC STRESS?

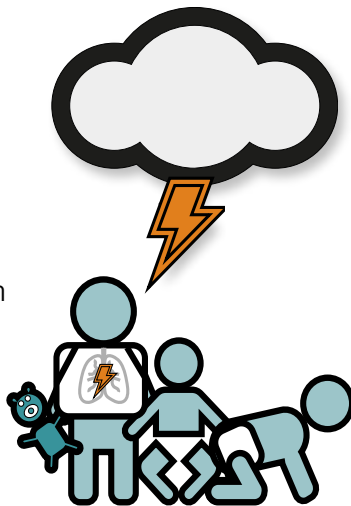
“ACEs” stands for “Adverse Childhood Experiences.” These experiences can include things like physical and emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver mental illness, and household violence.



The more ACEs a child experiences, the more likely he or she is to suffer from things like heart disease and diabetes, poor academic achievement, and substance abuse later in life.

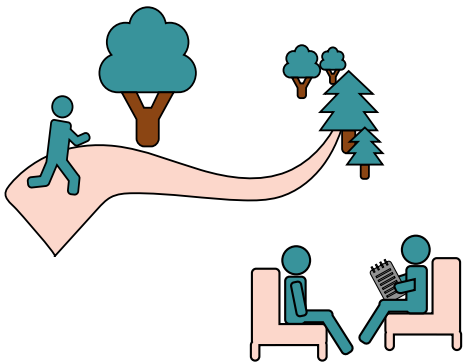
TOXIC STRESS EXPLAINS HOW ACES “GET UNDER THE SKIN.”

Experiencing many ACEs, as well as things like racism and community violence, without supportive adults, can cause what’s known as **toxic stress**. This excessive activation of the stress-response system can lead to long-lasting wear-and-tear on the body and brain.



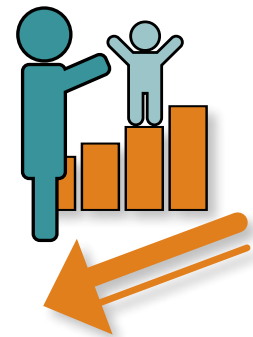
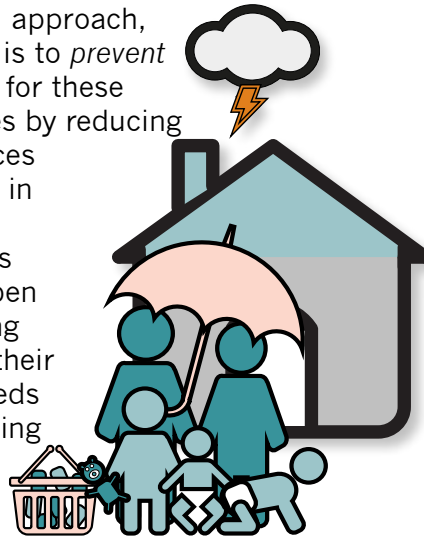
The effect would be similar to revving a car engine for days or weeks at a time.

WE CAN REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF ACEs AND TOXIC STRESS.



For those who have experienced ACEs, there are a range of possible responses that can help, including therapeutic sessions with mental health professionals, meditation, physical exercise, spending time in nature, and many others.

The ideal approach, however, is to *prevent* the need for these responses by reducing the sources of stress in people's lives. This can happen by helping to meet their basic needs or providing other services.



Likewise, fostering strong, [responsive relationships](#) between children and their caregivers, and helping children and adults build [core life skills](#), can help to buffer a child from the effects of [toxic stress](#).

ACEs affect people at all income and social levels, and can have serious, costly impact across the lifespan. **No one who's experienced significant adversity (or many ACEs) is irreparably damaged,** though we need to acknowledge trauma's effects on their lives. By reducing families' sources of stress, providing children and adults with responsive relationships, and strengthening the core life skills we all need to adapt and thrive, [we can prevent and counteract lasting harm.](#)

Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Learn more about ACEs from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

For more information: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/ACEs>



Sample School Health Letter from Pediatrician to School

To whom it may concern,

This letter is in regard to my patient, Sally Jones.

Sally was seen by me for evaluation of possible ADHD/angry outbursts/ behavior problems/ poor attention. A thorough medical evaluation was completed and revealed the most likely cause to be an overactive stress response (also known as the toxic stress response) caused by high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

In the toxic stress response, the body has difficulty regulating the stress response: it is quick to release high levels of stress hormones, the release of hormones may be greater than normal, and the body has difficulty shutting off the stress response. The effects of the toxic stress response may be on behavior, brain development, the immune system, hormones or all of the above.

Symptoms of a toxic stress include – being easily triggered, difficulty calming oneself down in stressful situations, impaired executive functioning (difficulty with attention, memory, impulse control and self-regulation). This impaired executive functioning can often lead to behavioral symptoms at school. Other symptoms include frequent infection, increase risk of asthma and allergies, increased aches and pains including headache and abdominal pain, and overweight or obesity.

The treatment regimen involves reducing the dose of adversity, regulating the stress response and enhancing the capacity of caring adults in the child's life to help buffer her stress response. Activities that regulate the stress response include – sleep, exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, mental health and healthy relationships.

Sally's treatment plan includes:

1. Guanfacine X mg by mouth every morning
2. 60 minutes vigorous exercise, 5 days per week.
3. Mindfulness practice, 10 minutes twice per day
4. In addition, Sally should receive trauma-focused mental health services and be considered for an individualized education plan that includes trauma-sensitive practices. Examples of a trauma-focused education plan include more regular check-ins with the child's family; identifying and effectively coordinating with mental health and other services outside the school; supporting access to community resources; and promoting predictable routines in the classroom to ensure the child's physical and psychological safety.



If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me. I look forward to partnering with you to support Sally's health and academic success.

Sincerely,

Name of Primary Care Provider

For more information on toxic stress, please visit:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

<https://www.stresshealth.org/>

<https://traumaawareschools.org/traumaInSchools>

<https://traumasensitiveschools.org/>

What Is Toxic Stress?



Everyone feels stress!

And not all stress is bad. Stress can help bring attention to what's important and be a motivator for problem-solving. But too much of the wrong kind of stress can be unhealthy. For children, this kind of stress can become toxic over time, affecting the way their brains and bodies grow. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) like abuse or neglect can cause this kind of stress and can harm a child's long-term health. Because of this possible impact, it's important to know a little more about stress and the different ways people's bodies can respond.



Positive stress response:

This is the body's response to temporary stress. Stress hormones help the body do what's needed in the moment. Once the event passes, the stress response turns off and the body goes back to its normal state. For example, starting a new child care arrangement or getting shots might lead to a positive stress response. Children can gain confidence and learn coping skills when supported through this type of stress.



Tolerable stress response:

This is the body's response to more lasting and serious stress. With tolerable stress, a child needs the help of a supportive caregiver to help her stay calm and turn down the stress response. With this support in place, the body can more easily return to its normal state. Tolerable stress can occur during events like an injury or natural disaster.



Toxic stress response:

This is the body's response to lasting and serious stress, without enough support from a caregiver. When a child doesn't get the help he needs, his body can't turn off the stress response normally. This lasting stress can harm a child's body and brain and can cause lifelong health problems. This type of stress results from exposure to things like abuse and neglect.

How does toxic stress affect children's bodies?



The brain:

Toxic stress can make it harder for children to sit still, pay attention, and learn. It can affect other behavior, too, causing children to have trouble remembering rules and to forget to think before acting. It can also affect a child's moods and feelings.



Immunity:

Toxic stress can make it harder for bodies to fight off infection and illness. For example, children may have more frequent colds and ear infections, or health conditions like eczema or asthma.



The heart:

Toxic stress can increase a person's risk of developing high blood pressure, elevating levels of inflammation that can damage the arteries. These conditions can lead to heart disease, stroke and other serious health issues later in life.



Hormones and development:

Toxic stress can impact growth and development. It can also lead to obesity and changes in the timing of puberty, as well as other issues.

How can adults protect children from toxic stress?

When caregivers consistently care for children and offer support, they feel safe. This feeling of safety is good for their brains and bodies. Other protective factors for your child include eating healthy food, getting regular exercise, getting a good night's sleep, practicing mindfulness, and getting mental health support when needed. Together, these factors help lower the stress response and can help reduce the potential negative effects of ACEs.



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A photograph of a woman with dark hair hugging a young child with curly hair. The child is smiling broadly and looking down. The woman is wearing a purple jacket. The background is dark and out of focus.

How to Reduce the Effects of ACEs and Toxic Stress

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may increase a child's risk of health problems, but parents' consistent care and support help to protect children's health. Relationships with loving and supportive adults can reduce children's stress levels. Even simple activities like playing with bubbles, bear hugs, lullabies, listening to music together, and coloring can make a difference.

What's the best way to respond to a child's ACEs? If possible, prevention of ACEs is best. In addition, you can:

- Tune in and learn your child's signals. Help your child calm down when you sense that she is stressed or scared. Soothe your child, and teach ways to calm down when feeling upset.
- Talk and play with your child. Babies like to be rocked, cuddled, and massaged. Toddlers thrive on hugs, shared stories and songs, and daily routines. These actions can help children feel seen, heard, and understood.
- Focus on managing your own stress. This can help you better adjust the way these feelings impact how you respond to your child. Having a calm parent will help protect your child during periods of stress.
- Take your child to regular medical visits. Your medical provider can help you understand when your child's health may be at risk.

Other ways to help your child's body deal with stress:

- Stick to daily routines. They help children know what's happening next, which can reduce stress.
- Have your child exercise regularly. Make sure your child is getting at least an hour per day of active play.
- Help your child eat well. Good nutrition builds brain health and protects the body. Serve fruits and veggies at meals and avoid junk food.
- Turn to supportive relationships in your family and community.
- Ensure your child gets adequate sleep. Sleep gives the body time to grow and recharge and children who get adequate sleep manage stress more easily.
- Seek mental health care if needed.
- Practice being in the moment; try breathing and meditation. It can help the body manage stress.
- Talk to your health care provider about whether your child's ACEs might be affecting his health and what you can do about it.

ACEs don't just affect children,

they affect families. Some of the most important things you can do to stop the effects of ACEs include learning to manage your *own* stress so you can be a healthy, stable, and caring presence for your child. This includes making lifestyle choices such as eating healthy food, getting regular exercise, making a good night's sleep a top priority, and practicing mindfulness. Getting mental health support can also be helpful if you experienced ACEs and trauma in your own childhood or are currently experiencing stressful or traumatic situations in your life. The good news is that science shows how bodies and brains grow and change *every minute of the day!* This means that by starting *today*, putting some of these lifestyle choices into action and getting the right help when you need it, can help build a healthier future for you and your family.

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The Benefit of Supportive Relationships



Relationships are important

for the health and well-being of every family. All families face difficulties. For some, the challenges are intense or too frequent for a child to manage. When a child is stressed often, is stressed for a long period of time, or experiences a severe stressor without the support of a caring adult, her body may react with a what is called a “toxic stress” response. Over time, without the right support from a trusted caregiver, this toxic stress response can harm a child’s developing brain and body. But the good news is—*it doesn’t have to!*



The first thing you can do is get support for yourself. A healthy, stable parent can more easily provide his child with a loving and supportive home life. Safe and nurturing relationships can protect children’s brains and bodies from the harmful effects of stress and adversity. Other things, like healthy nutrition, daily exercise, making a good night’s sleep a priority, practicing mindfulness, and getting mental health support if needed, can also help. These practices are great for you, and also for your child!

Supportive Relationship

Parents also need reliable and supportive relationships for sharing thoughts and feelings. You can build strong relationships in your community by connecting with family, friends, faith communities, and local resources such as parenting groups. Making healthy relationships a priority will help you feel more supported, which can *improve your ability to do the following:*

- Parent in ways that help your child feel safe, cared for, and protected.
- Provide a safe space for your child to explore, learn, and grow.



- Teach your child words for different feelings, like sad, happy, and mad. Help them recognize how and where they feel these emotions in their bodies. Sometimes the first sign of feeling stress is having a tight chest or a clenched jaw! Labeling and understanding these emotions is an important step in learning to manage feelings in a healthy way—for both adults and children!
- Set age-appropriate limits, state expectations clearly, and be consistent with age-appropriate discipline that focuses on teaching, not punishment.
- Treat everyone in the household with respect.
- Keep adults in your household from using violent or abusive language around or directed at children.
- Avoid physical discipline with children.
- Use daily routines to provide structure and a sense of safety.
- Tell your child when there will be changes to the daily routine, and what these changes will mean for him.
- Give your child some choices—like asking if she would like to brush her teeth before or after bath time.
- Pay attention to your child’s signals and respond with love and care.
- Make sure you enjoy special one-on-one time through play, stories, bath time, and shared meals.
- Let your child take the lead by letting him choose an activity and paying attention to him without distraction when you do something together.
- *Recognize when you are feeling stress!* When this happens, have an action plan. For instance, you might think about taking an “adult time out” for a few minutes. This will allow you to take a deep breath, refocus, and return to your family in a calmer state of mind. This is important! Because when kids see adults around them manage stress in a healthy way, they learn to do the same thing.

These practices help create safe and stable homes that are good for everyone in the family.

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