



## Why It Is Important to Strengthen Protective Relationships for Children

Children are completely dependent on the relationships they develop with their caregivers. These relationships are the foundation for the social, emotional, and physical health throughout their lives.

### PURPOSE

Significant stress in the lives of young children is viewed as a risk factor for the genesis of health-threatening behaviors and a catalyst for physiologic responses that can lay the groundwork for chronic, stress-related diseases later in life. In addition to short-term changes in observable behavior, toxic stress in young children can lead to less visible, yet permanent changes in brain structure and function. In addition, high levels of stress in early childhood can trigger amygdala hypertrophy, chronically activated physiologic stress response, and increased potential for fear and anxiety.

### FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Research shows that interventions which strengthen the capacities of families to protect young children from the disruptive effects of toxic stress are likely to promote healthier brain development and enhanced physical and mental well-being.

Healthcare practitioners play a major role in creating foundations of healthy development. Significant reduction in the prevalence of chronic disease could be achieved by strengthening the protective relationships that help mitigate the harmful effects of toxic stress. The foundations of healthy development refer to three domains in which the early roots of physical and mental health are nourished:

**Stable, responsive relationships** that provide consistent, nurturing, and protective interactions with adults to enhance learning and help them develop adaptive capacities that promote well-regulated stress-response systems.



**Safe and supportive environments** which provide physical and emotional spaces that are free from toxins and fear, allow active exploration without significant risk of harm, and offer support for families raising young children.



**Sound and appropriate nutrition** including breastfeeding, followed by health-promoting food intake and eating habits, beginning with the future mother's preconception nutritional status.

### BIOLOGY OF HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

When developing biological systems are strengthened by positive early experiences, children are more likely to grow up to be healthy, contributing adults. Advances in neuroscience, molecular biology, and genomics have converged on three compelling conclusions:

**Early experiences** are built into our bodies.



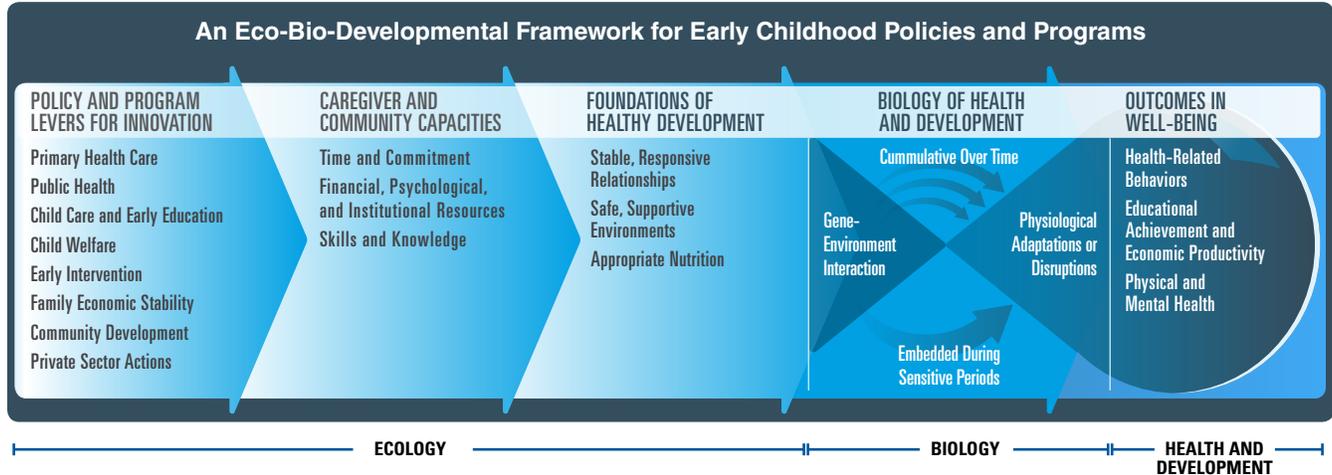
**Significant adversity** can produce physiologic disruptions or biological memories that undermine the development of the body's stress response systems and affect the developing brain, cardiovascular system, immune system, and metabolic regulatory controls.



**Physiologic disruptions** can persist far into adulthood and lead to lifelong impairments in both physical and mental health.



Addressing the multiple domains that affect the biology of health and development—including the foundations of healthy development, caregiver and community capacities, and public and private sector policies and programs—can improve outcomes in well-being.



**SUMMARY**

Supporting parents and caregivers to better provide protective relationships is key to childrens' healthy development. Given the extent to which costly health disparities in adults are rooted in early adverse childhood experiences, the identification and reduction of toxic stress in young children ought to be a high priority for medicine as a whole and for pediatrics in particular.

**Key Points**

- Consider the child's biology and foundations for healthy development and how toxic stress may impact them.
- Recognize the role the pediatrician has in supporting the healthy foundations.
- It is critical to identify and address the concerns when a child's foundation of healthy development is less than desirable.



**RESOURCES**

Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2011). Policy Statement: The Pediatrician's Role in Family Support and Family Support Programs. *Pediatrics*, 128(6), 1680-1684.

Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, and Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. (2012). Policy Statement: Early Childhood Adversity, Toxic Stress, and the Role of the Pediatrician: Translating Developmental Science into Lifelong Health. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 224-231. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-2662

Shonkoff, J. P., Boyce, T. W., McEwen, B. S. (2009). Neuroscience, molecular biology, and the childhood roots of health disparities: Building a new framework for health promotion and disease prevention. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 301(21), 2252-2259. doi:10.1001/jama.2009.754

Shonkoff, J.P., Garner, A.S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 232-246. doi: 10.1542/peds.2011-2663

**“ It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”**

Frederick Douglas (1817-1895)

