



# DEFINING Toxic Stress

FROM A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

About the Early Childhood – Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC) Learning Lab on Community Responses to Toxic Stress

In recent years, important attention has been paid to the concept of toxic stress and its impact on development. As scientific understanding of toxic stress grows, communities across the country are finding ways to prevent and respond to toxic stress in the lives of community members, particularly young children and their families. Six such communities are working together in the EC-LINC Learning Lab on Community Responses to Toxic Stress, facilitated by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

Building on the widely used definition of toxic stress from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child, the Learning Lab has worked to define what toxic stress is, why it is of concern and how communities can respond:

 **Toxic stress occurs in response to the strong, frequent and/or prolonged activation of the body's stress response system** without adequate protective relationships and other mediating factors. Stressors may include individual experiences of adversity, as well as family and community circumstances that cause a sense of serious threat or chaos.

 **The effects of toxic stress can be seen in a wide range of poorer outcomes for individuals and populations** in learning, behavior and health. Left unmitigated, these effects can occur over the course of an individual's life and can even affect subsequent generations.

 **Exposure to toxic stress in pregnant women, infants and young children is of particular concern** because of the potential disruption in brain architecture and other organ systems during a critical period of growth and development. Toxic stress in utero and early in life can have far-reaching effects on physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

 **Not all stress is bad.** Brief exposure to mild stressors produces “positive stress,” a normal part of healthy development. More serious stress, even when emotionally costly, may or may not trigger a toxic stress response. Responses to stress vary, depending on individual and family characteristics, prior experiences and context, including the presence of individual, family and community protective factors. Chronic exposure to stress and adversity in the family or community can have a cumulative toxic stress effect.

 **Safe, stable, nurturing relationships can help to buffer young children from experiencing a toxic stress response when they face significant adversity.** Promoting positive experiences, reducing potential sources of toxic stress in families' lives and connecting children and families to relevant formal and informal supports can nurture internal resilience and other protective factors that help children, families and communities thrive.

EC-LINC convenes Learning Labs to support joint learning across member communities on emerging topics and those that are considered particularly difficult to address. The Learning Lab approach taps the expertise, analysis and problem-solving of EC-LINC member communities to help early childhood advocates and systems builders in other communities across the country.

The EC-LINC Learning Lab on Community Responses to Toxic Stress includes representatives of six communities working to address toxic stress within their early childhood systems. Together, they explore how each community is responding to the growing understanding of – and interest in – the impact of toxic stress on the developing child and its implications for lifelong health and well-being. The EC-LINC Learning Lab focuses on community and systems-level approaches to toxic stress, rather than clinical or programmatic responses.



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