Early Neglect and Brain Development

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Please use the chat/comment box for any questions or comments you have regarding today's webinar, time permitting they will be answered at the end of the presentation.
Early Neglect and Brain Development

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INTRODUCTION
Objectives

At the end of today’s webinar, participants will be able to:

• Identify early neglect as a source of stress to the developing brain
• Describe how the brain responds to stress
• Compare and contrast three levels of stress
• List potential negative effects of early neglect
• Explain ways to buffer the developing brain from the effects of neglect
Grace, a 2 year old, lives with her mother and three older sisters. Her mother, a single parent, works two jobs. Grace is left in the care of her 8-year-old sister while their mother is at her night job.

Grace’s mother is showing signs of clinical depression. When she is at home, she spends all of her time in bed or texting her friends, and she has no time or patience with Grace or her sisters. She ignores the children when they try to get her attention, and simply turns up the TV to “drown out the ruckus.” The family has no planned meals, because the mother came from a family that just snacked on processed foods all day. Grace needs help to open the refrigerator or cabinet doors and get food out. Sometimes the others are too busy or distracted to help her.
Why is it so important to study the brain?

Recent brain research tells us...

- The brain is not fully developed at birth
- Important foundations are formed before age 3
- Early, positive interactions with nurturing adults are vital to healthy brain development
- Sensory experiences affect early brain development
Parts of the Brain

- Limbic system (inside the brain)
  - Amygdala
  - Hippocampus

Brain stem

Cerebellum

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CHAPTER 1: BRAIN ANATOMY
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Parts of the Brain

Cerebral cortex

Limbic system (inside the brain)
- Amygdala
- Hippocampus

Brain stem

Cerebellum
The Stress Response

- Stressors cause physical and psychological changes
  - Release of cortisol
  - “Fight or flight” response
  - Increased heart rate
  - Increased adrenaline
  - Highly focused attention

- Primitive parts of the brain take over
Levels of Stress

3 Levels of Stress:
- Positive Stress
- Tolerable Stress
- Toxic Stress
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Neglect and the Brain: Grace’s Life

Potential Tolerable/Toxic Stressors

• Single parent who works 2 jobs
• Being cared for by 8-year-old sister
• Poor nutrition
• Irregular eating schedule; not having needs met
• Unresponsive mother
• Others?

What might Grace need to make these stresses **tolerable** rather than **toxic**?
Dangers from Prolonged Stress

- Fewer synaptic connections
- Dominance of survival instincts
- Persistent hyper-arousal
- Impulsivity
- Reduced ability to learn
- Memory loss
Importance of Consistency

- Predictability minimizes stress
- Repetition reinforces brain connections
- Knowing what to expect builds confidence and competence
- Limits encourage self-regulation
Key Factors that Mitigate Stress

- Loving, responsive, consistent relationships
- Safe environments
- Experience regulating stress in supportive environments
- Development of trust
- Resiliency
Early Neglect and Toxic Stress: What Parents Can Do

• Be emotionally and physically available
• Build solid, responsive relationships with children through being responsive
• Create and follow routines at home
• Set and reinforce age-appropriate rules
• Identify and seek help for mental health issues
• Connect with other families
• Learn about child development
Early Neglect and Toxic Stress: What Professionals Can Do

- Provide a place of safety and security for children
- Teach parents skills that increase their resilience in times of stress
- Provide concrete support in times of need (e.g., connect parents to mental health support)
- Help parents learn about appropriate expectations for children of different ages
- Connect parents to each other for support
- Build social and emotional skills in young children
Stress and Trauma

When you look at children who come out of terrible environments and do well, you find someone in their lives somehow instilled in them the attitude that they aren’t helpless, that they aren’t powerless, that they can do something.

—Dr. Bruce Perry

...You can make a difference!
For More Information


Resources to Help Families

• Just in Time eXtension Parenting e-newsletters (for ages 0 – 5) - http://bit.ly/1pZ5Rna
Society cannot continue to ignore the laws of biology. The more we learn about early brain development, the more responsibility we have to act on that knowledge.

—Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

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