Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress and the Impacts of Racism on the Foundations of Health

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Find Us: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard
Three Converging Lenses
for thinking about investment in the prenatal and early childhood periods
Understanding the Impact of Early Experiences on the Architecture of the Developing Brain
Science-Informed Early Childhood Policy begins by understanding why early experiences are so important for the developing brain.

Source: Levitt (2009)
Toxic Stress Disrupts Brain Architecture With Consequences for Early Learning and Behavior
Rapidly moving advances in the biology of adversity and resilience are deepening our understanding of the early foundations of learning, behavior, and health.
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- Interactive development of multiple biological systems
- Variation in sensitivity to the environment
- Timing and critical periods
The Benefits and Harm of Stress

Understanding how acute threats and chronic adversity get into the body and affect current and future well-being.
Increasing Resilience in the Face of Adversity
by strengthening buffers and building adaptive capacities

- Robust social capital
- Faith and cultural traditions
- Supportive services
- Responsive relationships

Negative Outcomes  Fulcrum  Positive Outcomes
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The time is ripe for a mindset shift in science-informed policy and practice.
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**ECD 1.0**

Early brain development in an environment of relationships

**ECD 2.0**

Connecting the brain to the rest of the body in a broader ecosystem
Leveraging ECD 2.0 to Re-Envision a Bold Early Childhood Agenda in a World of Striking Inequality and Uncertainty

New Science + More Diverse Voices = Greater Impact
Readiness to succeed in school

The early foundations of lifelong physical and mental health

Leveraging ECD 2.0 to Re-Envision a Bold Early Childhood Agenda in a World of Striking Inequality and Uncertainty

ECD 1.0

IT’S STILL ABOUT
Readiness to succeed in school

ECD 2.0

AND IT’S ALSO ABOUT
The early foundations of lifelong physical and mental health
Leveraging ECD 2.0 to Re-Envision a Bold Early Childhood Agenda in a World of Striking Inequality and Uncertainty

ECD 1.0
IT’S STILL ABOUT
Providing enrichment for young minds

ECD 2.0
AND IT’S ALSO ABOUT
Protecting developing brains and bodies from the biological disruptions of adversity and tailoring responses to meet a range of child and family needs
Leveraging ECD 2.0 to Re-Envision a Bold Early Childhood Agenda in a World of Striking Inequality and Uncertainty

ECD 1.0

It’s still about
Caregiver-child relationships

ECD 2.0

And it’s also about
Communities, business, and government working together to assure a supportive and healthy environment for all families raising young children
Racism Imposes Multiple Sources of Stress Activation on Families Raising Young Children

**INSTITUTIONAL/STRUCTURAL:**
Inequities built into social, political, and economic systems

**CULTURAL:** Ideologies embedded in language, symbols, media, and common assumptions

**INTERPERSONAL:** Individual experiences of bias or discrimination
Where children live presents assets and threats that affect their health and development.

Child Opportunity Index
(100 Largest U.S. Metro Areas; 72,000 census tracts)

- High quality childcare
- Education proficiency
- Education resources
- Access to healthy food
- Green space
- Housing vacancy rate
- Toxic waste proximity
- Air pollution
- Extreme heat
- Health resources
- Economic opportunities
- Home ownership
- Median income
- Commuting time

Source: Acevedo-Garcia et. al. (2014)
Residential Segregation Leads to Wide Disparities in opportunities and adversities across neighborhoods

diversitydatakids.org
"The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them."

Nobel Laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf nailed our marching orders: