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WORKING TOWARD Well-Being COMMUNITY APPROACHES TO TOXIC STRESS

An issue brief from the Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress convened by the Center for the Study of Social Policy

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About the Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress

Early Childhood-LINC is a learning and innovation network for communities—a network of communities that have come together with CSSP to demonstrate effective approaches to developing local early childhood systems. Together, the participating communities tackle tough problems, test new solutions and accelerate progress toward ensuring that all young children and their families thrive.

Learning labs are a process by which leaders from Early Childhood-LINC communities share expertise and local experiences and develop recommendations for action. Over a period of six to eight months, leaders talk regularly; pool ideas; and refine their recommendations about how to improve services, supports and community strategies to assist young children and their families. Their recommendations are then shared with the full Early Childhood-LINC network and the broader early childhood field.

The Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress convened in 2015 and included representatives of six communities working to address toxic stress within their early childhood systems. Together, they explored how communities are 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 Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab focused on community and systems-level approaches to toxic stress, rather than clinical or programmatic responses.

In recent years, significant attention has been paid to the concept of toxic stress and the impact of adverse experiences in childhood on lifelong health and development. As scientific understanding continues to grow, community leaders are searching for ways to prevent and respond to toxic stress in the lives of young children and their families as part of their broader efforts to achieve healthy development and well-being for all children. Leaders from six communities worked together in 2015 with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) through the the Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress (see sidebar) to learn from each other's experiences, discuss the challenges and opportunities they face and generate ideas to improve the response to toxic stress in their own communities and in others.

This issue brief distills the experiences and recommendations of leaders from these six communities and from CSSP. It provides:

- A definition of toxic stress from a community perspective
- A framework for a comprehensive community approach to toxic stress, nested within the broader context of working toward healthy development and well-being
- Practical examples of how member communities of the Early Childhood-LINC network are taking action
- Recommendations for next steps to promote and further develop comprehensive approaches to toxic stress in communities across the country

The framework presented here can be useful to other local leaders, including those involved in community coalitions and collective impact efforts to promote the healthy development and well-being of young children; parents and all adults who play a significant role in the lives of children; public officials and policymakers; and the many practitioners who are weaving together health, early care and education, family support and other strategies to form aligned early childhood systems. Our aim is to articulate how multiple efforts can fit together to create conditions in which children (and adults) are less likely to experience toxic stress and more likely to receive appropriate support when they do. The recommendations here can also be a tool for local leaders to reach out to potential new partners as they craft solutions that reach more people more effectively. Finally, the framework can be useful to parents, other family members and community residents to increase their understanding of toxic stress and suggest what they can do to prevent and mitigate the effects of toxic stress on their children and all children in their community.

DEFINING Toxic Stress FROM A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Building on the widely used definition of toxic stress from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child, Learning Lab participants worked to define toxic stress from a community perspective, articulate why it is of concern and identify how communities can respond. (A handout, *Defining Toxic Stress from a Community Perspective*, is available [here](#).)

 **A toxic stress response is 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.

 **A toxic stress response 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.

 **Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and communities 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.



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.



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.

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WHY A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK AT THE **Community Level?**

While scientists grapple with questions about the biological and developmental impact of toxic stress, including what helps some people thrive despite significant adversity, and clinicians and other service providers explore how best to help individual children and adults heal from traumatic experiences, the questions about and responses to toxic stress are of a different sort when this phenomenon is considered from a community perspective. Some of the critical questions that leaders at the neighborhood, city and county levels are asking about toxic stress include:

- What are we already doing in our community to prevent the conditions that can generate a toxic stress response in parents and their young children? That is, what is currently being done in our community to:
 - Address root causes of toxic stress, such as poverty, community violence and experiences of racism
 - Increase family and community characteristics and experiences that make it more likely that children and families will thrive
 - Support parents and other family members to develop the skills that help them to prevent their children from experiencing a toxic stress response to adverse experiences, and to learn effective strategies when they are caring for children who have already experienced toxic stress
 - Help children, parents and other adults heal from toxic stress
 - What level of coordination of these activities is already in place? How can we better collaborate across existing agencies and systems to achieve better outcomes?
 - What additional services, supports or opportunities would enhance existing efforts?
- How might an understanding of toxic stress lead us to change the way we go about our current work?
 - Where do young children and their families spend their time? Where do they encounter informal supports, professionals and services that could address potential sources of toxic stress, help parents build their skills in buffering their children from a toxic stress response, provide a concrete response to traumatic experiences or refer them to relevant programs and services?
 - What are the greatest sources of stress in children's environments or threats to their well-being in our community?
 - Which of the solutions we want to develop can be single-sector in nature (i.e., within the purview of a single agency or system) and which need to be cross sector? In either case, who are the key players who need to be engaged in the work to address harmful conditions for children that can generate a toxic stress response? Who are the key agents for change who can help put an effective community response in place?

To answer these and other questions, Learning Lab participants found it useful to develop an organizing framework to help communities identify and align key actors and conditions needed to effectively reduce toxic stress and its impact on well-being for individuals, families and the community as a whole. The framework reflects several considerations that were critical to the participating communities:

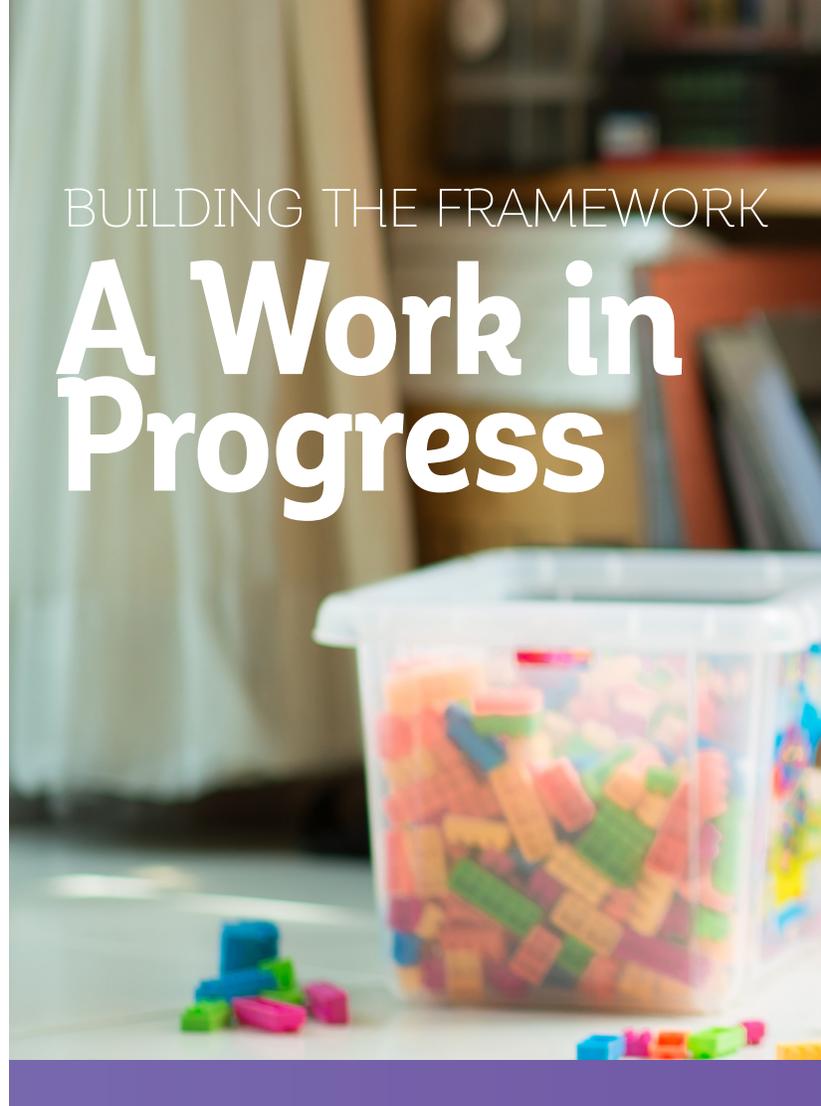
- **Communities must mobilize resources to reduce sources of harmful stress to children and families, as well as mitigate the effects of a toxic stress response when it occurs.** While responses to symptoms of toxic stress are critical to the resilience and well-being of the individual

child, community approaches to the problem of toxic stress need to work from a broader perspective. A rich set of coordinated efforts can reduce the likelihood of such experiences in the first place, increase the ability of parents, family members and service providers to buffer children from adverse experiences (turning potentially toxic stress into manageable stress) and ensure that those who have experienced toxic stress are identified and receive appropriate support. This includes efforts by parents, community members, service providers, systems leaders, businesses and policymakers, shown as “agents for change” in the framework. It also includes strategies aimed at improving child and family well-being more generally, which can and should be informed by an understanding of toxic stress and linked to efforts specifically aimed at toxic stress.

- **Parents are key to efforts to prevent and reduce the harmful effects of adverse experiences in children.** Parents and other adults in children’s lives can play a critical role in buffering children from experiencing a toxic stress response when they have been exposed to adversity, and responding in productive ways when children exhibit signs of a toxic stress response. In addition, it was critical to the members of the learning lab to include the role of parents and community members in organizing and advocating to reduce sources of toxic stress in their communities, as well as taking actions within their own families and social networks. These efforts are often what spurs the other agents for change—service providers, community leaders and decision-makers—to incorporate more effective practices and policies throughout the community that help children and families thrive.
- **While some of the approaches in this framework have evolved in direct response to our greater understanding of toxic stress in recent years, others have been used for many years to improve conditions and support health and well-being for children and families.** This framework illuminates the connections across those approaches. Concern about toxic stress may drive attention and resources to clinical and programmatic responses to individuals suffering from a toxic stress response. Learning Lab participants articulated the need for parallel investments in prevention efforts and community-level action to address sources of stress for children and families. Within the framework, many people, groups and organizations can find their role in preventing and responding to toxic stress in their community and can identify other potential partners in that work.
- **In most communities, some subset of these strategies is already in place, but lack of coordination and alignment makes it difficult to achieve large-scale change.** In building and disseminating the framework, Learning Lab participants hoped to provide perspective on how communities can broaden and align their efforts around toxic stress and child and family well-being, bolstered by examples of “putting the pieces together” from their communities.

BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK

A Work in Progress



In developing the framework, local leaders “began with the end in mind,” that is, by defining the desired outcomes for young children and their families. The outcomes are broadly defined in the framework as *healthy development* and *children and families thrive*. The framework then is organized to describe what is needed to achieve those results. That is, it answers the questions: What are the individual and family experiences that would lead to these positive outcomes? What is the community context that makes those experiences more likely for families and individuals? And finally, who are the key actors within communities and early childhood systems, and what can they do to effect change?

Figure 1 represents the current thinking of Learning Lab participants as they consider how best to describe and organize a population-wide approach to address toxic stress. As CSSP and the Early Childhood-LINC community leaders continue their work on toxic stress and further explore the opportunities and roles of specific agents for change within an early childhood system, the framework is likely to be revised and expanded.



Using the Framework

The framework of community approaches to toxic stress can be used by city and county officials, community coalitions and “backbone” organizations to develop a more comprehensive, coordinated approach to toxic stress. At the same time, community groups, organizations and individuals can use the framework to see their part in a larger system and to help move from piecemeal strategies to more comprehensive, aligned and multisector approaches to prevent and respond to toxic stress—approaches that can make a difference for children and families in the community as a whole. For example:

- A community coalition or public agency might use the framework to broaden their thinking about promoting child and family well-being while being aware of the concerns raised by new knowledge of toxic stress. This might mean considering other partners they should invite to the table, targeting specific changes they would like to make in the community context or making connections between community partners who do not usually work together.
- A group of parents or community residents concerned about toxic stress might use the framework to identify aspects of their community context they want to change, actions they can take to get there and who they need to engage among service providers and community leaders.
- Professionals working with children and/or families might identify areas of the framework where they currently play a role, areas where they could do more and potential partnerships that would allow them to make a greater impact at a community or population level.
- Providers focused on promoting healthy development and preventing toxic stress can see where their work intersects with providers focused on identifying or intervening with those who have already experienced a toxic stress response – and vice versa.
- Learning from the examples from Early Childhood-LINC communities, anyone can become an agent for change in their own community, and anyone already working to improve conditions for children and families can find ways to multiply their impact through partnerships at the community and system level.

Working Toward Well-Being: A Framework of Community Approaches to Toxic Stress

Agents for Change within a Community System

Parents and caregivers organize to:

- Develop strategies to prevent and respond to stressors in their families and communities
- Learn, develop and share strategies to respond to the impact of toxic stress in their children and families
- Develop leadership skills and partner with program, system and community leaders

Providers work to:

- Build awareness of the impact of toxic stress
- Develop and implement strategies to promote healthy development and prevent stress for both parents and children
- Effectively screen and assess to identify needs for services
- Build capacity to respond to intensive needs with appropriate services and referrals

Multisystem, community partners and policymakers coordinate their efforts to:

- Engage all sectors of the community in supporting families
- Support programmatic changes
- Ensure an array of services/supports are available
- Promote policies, practices and techniques that mitigate stress and promote healthy development
- Reduce or eliminate root causes of toxic stress in the community
- Develop/implement financing strategies



Community Context

Parents and other caregivers have opportunities to:

- Understand effects of toxic stress
- Learn/implement positive parenting strategies
- Make decisions for their families and communities

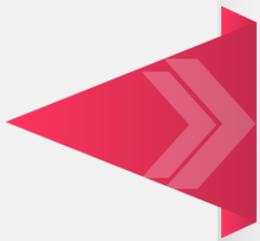
An aligned set of formal and informal, effective services, interventions and opportunities are available for children and adults.

Service providers recognize and respond appropriately to symptoms of toxic stress.

Other community entities are family-friendly and trauma-informed.

Protective factors are robust in families and communities.





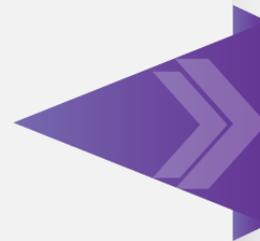
Individual & Family Experiences

Children grow up in a rich environment of positive experiences.

Children have minimal exposure to severe and/or prolonged stress.

Parents and other adults provide buffering to prevent a toxic stress response.

Children and adults receive appropriate support for toxic stress experienced.



Outcomes

Healthy Development

Children and families thrive



FIGURE 1

EXAMPLES FROM Early Childhood-LINC COMMUNITIES

As a first step in building a more comprehensive community approach to toxic stress, the Early Childhood-LINC communities have identified strategies already in place in their local jurisdictions. The examples below include actions addressing the root causes of toxic stress in communities and direct responses to toxic stress, as well as other strategies aimed at improving child and family well-being. Each of the examples can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to preventing and mitigating toxic stress in young children. While most of the Early Childhood-LINC communities do not yet have a comprehensive toxic stress initiative in place, they have opportunities to build on existing programs and approaches that are already part of their broader, comprehensive early childhood systems. Additionally, while each example is listed here under a specific “agent for change” heading, many of the strategies involve multiple actors and could be listed in more than one place.

Parent Strategies

Parents are motivated to act as agents of change in many ways. In some cases, parents have self-organized and are taking action, with or without support from formal organizations. Some parents have educated themselves about toxic stress and trauma-informed care to advocate for schools and other systems to adequately respond to their children’s needs. In other instances, organizations “set the table” for parents to come together and address sources of toxic stress in their lives and communities. The examples below illustrate how parents in three Early Childhood-LINC communities are engaged in tackling community challenges related to toxic stress.

- **Community dialogues leading to community action:** The Denver Dialogues for Young Children included five community convenings in March 2015 of over 110 family, friend, neighbor and community members, including 40 Spanish speakers. Each of the five events was centered around an episode of the [Raising of America](#) documentary series about the challenges facing young children and their families, followed by a discussion facilitated by 2-3 parent/resident event hosts. One episode of the documentary, “Wounded Places,” focuses on neighborhoods where residents are disproportionately exposed to stressors. Based on the community interest in the Denver Dialogues, a BUILD Health Challenge grant was awarded to partners

working to address health disparities before children enter school in five North East Denver neighborhoods. EastSide Unified is an inclusive, community-driven process with family and resident leaders guiding the focus and working together to develop a community action plan.

- **Parent advocacy:** [Oakland Parents Together](#) empowers parents to advocate for their children in the Oakland public schools. As part of their work, they provide [Parent Cafés](#) – six-week series of guided conversations among parents about the protective factors that keep their families strong, which grew out of CSSP’s [Strengthening Families](#) initiative. Through Parent Cafés, parents have the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with other parents, find common areas of concern and opportunities for collective action and build their confidence in speaking up to advocate for their children and themselves.
- **Family leadership:** The [Parent Leadership Pathway](#) is a parent-driven approach to family engagement in early care and education programs supported by Boston Children Thrive. It prioritizes collaborative decision-making between parents and professionals, sharing responsibility for children’s learning and valuing each other as partners. This core strategy for improving the well-being of at-risk children provides opportunities and support for increased engagement of parents in leadership and decision-making as part of parent-led projects at the program and neighborhood level. All parents are engaged as partners in their children’s programs, with opportunities for greater leadership through helping to plan, implement and evaluate neighborhood activities through the School Readiness Roundtable; stipended peer-to-peer parent outreach roles; and service on the Parent Leadership Exchange. Boston Children Thrive has a particular focus on providing equal access to leadership opportunities for families of color, low-income families, non-English-speaking families and families of children with special needs.

Service Provider Strategies

The service providers that operate within well-functioning early childhood systems need opportunities to deepen their knowledge about trauma and toxic stress; tools to help them

identify children and families in need of additional support; and the ability to respond appropriately with referrals and trauma-informed services when needed.



Multisystem, Community Partner and Policymaker Strategies

- **Pediatric care providers:** Pediatric healthcare providers in five communities are currently replicating [Project DULCE](#) (Developmental Understanding and Legal Collaboration for Everyone), a universal, primary care intervention in which pediatricians, family support specialists and lawyers work together to address social determinants of health, build protective factors and promote resilience for infants (birth through age 6 months) and their families.
- **Mental health consultants:** Service providers in several Early Childhood-LINC communities – including home visitors, family support providers, early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers – partner with mental health consultants to more effectively serve families whose children have challenging behaviors, including those who have experienced or are at risk for a toxic stress response. For example, a preschool teacher might need support with strategies to manage disruptive behaviors in a child who was recently removed from his home and placed in foster care; or a child whose behavior has significantly regressed during the serious illness of her father. With coaching from a mental health consultant, the teacher can keep the child in the classroom and work with the family (parents, foster parents or other caregivers, as appropriate) on how to support the child and manage challenging behaviors at home.
- **Family Support Services:** The Lamoille Family Center offers [Rocking Horse Circles of Support](#), a 10-week group for pregnant and parenting women experiencing personal or familial substance use/abuse in the Lamoille region of Vermont. The groups empower women to take action to protect themselves and their children from potential sources of toxic stress in their lives.
- **Child welfare services:** A collaborative systems change effort focused on the needs of children ages 0-5 in Ventura County's child welfare system resulted in training for staff on child development, the Strengthening Families protective factors and trauma-informed care, as well as policy and procedure changes to better serve this vulnerable population.
- **Shelter Services:** In Alameda, First 5 offers training on trauma for both a general audience of providers, and for specific provider groups. For example, a Shelter Learning Community received trainings including “Creating a Trauma Informed Shelter Environment,” “Helping Children and Families Heal from Trauma” and “Impact of Trauma on Brain Development.”

Early Childhood-LINC communities and others across the country see the value in comprehensive, multi-sector approaches to serving children and families in order to achieve change in the community as a whole. Actions by parents and service providers like those described above are important, and become even more so when systemic support is available to reinforce, enable, replicate and align their efforts.

- **Participation in broad-based trauma-informed coalitions:**
 - In the San Francisco Bay Area, First 5 Alameda County (F5AC) participates in Trauma Transformed (T2), a seven-county regional trauma-informed system of care initially spearheaded by the SF Public Health Department. T2 focuses on providing training, aligning service system policies and practices throughout the region and coordinating care so that residents of all ages can access the services and supports they need.
 - In Florida, the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSCPBC) participates in Birth to 22: United for Brighter Futures, a collective impact initiative aimed at assuring that PBC youth reach their full potential. The initial impetus for the initiative was as a response to events at Sandy Hook. Recognizing the need to address mental health, violence prevention, trauma and related issues, the initiative starts with a focus on promoting healthy development from early childhood forward, and the Children's Services Council has taken the lead in developing and coordinating services and supports for the Birth-5 population.
- **Universal developmental screening, referral and linkage:** Early Childhood-LINC communities identified developmental screening, referral and linkage as an important strategy for finding children at risk of or experiencing toxic stress. All of the Early Childhood-LINC communities have screening and linkage protocols in place across a range of service providers to identify children with developmental issues and help link families to needed services and supports. While there are no proven general screening instruments for toxic stress, a variety of tools are available to identify children facing developmental and behavioral challenges. Combined with further assessment, they can help providers address underlying causes of developmental and/or behavioral issues, which may include experiences of adversity and toxic stress. Examples from Early Childhood-LINC communities include:
 - The majority of Early Childhood-LINC communities are implementing [Help Me Grow](#), a centralized resource and referral service that links families to a range of needed developmental services and supports. These referrals can help families address a wide variety of concerns, including those that might stem from exposure to adversity. With a referral to Help Me Grow, providers can

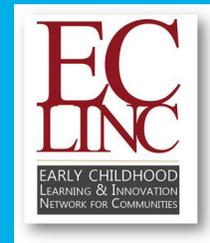
connect families to the range of services and supports in the community. Help Me Grow also brings together service providers to identify and address gaps in the available services and supports.

- In Boston, [Screen to Succeed](#) promotes the use of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) to build parents' understanding of their children's development and to identify children at risk of developmental delay and connect them to services. The screenings are administered by early care and education providers as well as by parents themselves with the support of peer mentors.
- In Hartford, the Connecticut Children's Medical Center, Office for Community Child Health provides training for health care providers on developmental screening, surveillance and linkage to services through their [Educating Practices in the Community \(EPIC\)](#) program.
- Through [Bridges Maternal Child Health Network](#), birthing hospitals in Orange County conduct a bedside screening for all new mothers to identify needs and risks and provide and refer for services as appropriate. This is one important means of proactively identifying and addressing social and economic factors that can lead to a toxic stress response, with related health and developmental issues.

- **A multisector system of preventive interventions:** Three Early Childhood-LINC communities (Palm Beach, Ventura and Orange counties) are implementing the Positive Parenting Program, known as [Triple P](#). Triple P is a system of aligned, evidence-based education and support for parents and caregivers. With a primary goal of child abuse and neglect prevention, the five levels of Triple P range in intensity from social marketing to pediatric clinic-based intervention to group-based parent support. The various levels are designed to meet the needs of families experiencing typical and everyday challenges of raising children as well as those experiencing more complex challenges.
- **Cross-agency learning community:** In Ventura County, eight agencies formed a working group focused on Strengthening Families, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), toxic stress, trauma-informed care and resilience-building strategies. Together, they developed a shared vision and logic model for family support; collaborated to expand Triple P implementation in a high-need community; and hosted a community convening and multi-sector learning community on ACEs/toxic stress, trauma informed care, and resilience building strategies.



Recommendations



Developing comprehensive approaches to toxic stress and the promotion of the well-being of young children and their families is a complex process that unfolds over time. There can be wide variations in how communities approach this goal, depending on the quality and quantity of services already available; whether parents and community residents have a history of organizing and advocacy; the existing degree of collaboration within and across systems; and funding and policy support for system building.

To better support communities making shifts toward greater alignment of systems and services to prevent and respond to potential toxic stress in the lives of children and families, CSSP and the Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress put forth the following recommendations for early childhood systems builders, policymakers and other community leaders:

PROVIDE INFORMATION AND PROMOTE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS TOXIC STRESS AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING

- Reach out to parents and caregivers with information about toxic stress, trauma, protective factors and community opportunities they can act on.
- Increase the role and authority of parent advisory groups in problem-solving, decision-making and programming at all levels, particularly in decision-making that relates to potential sources of toxic stress in their lives and communities.
- Create leadership development ladders for parents and community residents to effect change in their communities, particularly in communities where residents are disproportionately exposed to potential sources of toxic stress.
- Seek out and partner with existing groups of parents advocating for trauma-informed care and better conditions for themselves, their children and/or their communities.

SUPPORT AND BUILD CAPACITY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS TOXIC STRESS AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING

- Provide child development, trauma and toxic stress training, coaching and mental health consultation

for service providers in all systems that serve children and families, across the spectrum from prevention to intervention.

- Promote the use of tools and strategies to build resilience and promote healthy development.
- Develop an aligned and tiered set of services/supports/opportunities to better identify and meet the full array of needs of young children and their families in any given community.

DEVELOP AND ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR MULTI-SECTOR AND BROAD-BASED COLLABORATION FOCUSED ON TRAUMA, TOXIC STRESS AND CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

- Fund a convening and connecting role (sometimes referred to as the “connective tissue” or backbone organization) to bring together all stakeholders with an interest in preventing and responding to toxic stress and promoting healthy development.
- Assess current assets and needs related to trauma and toxic stress in the community – including child and family service systems, other services and supports and neighborhood assets and opportunities.
- Consider an initial information campaign to heighten community awareness and mobilize action on trauma, toxic stress, healthy development and child and family well-being.
- Develop a strategic plan that builds on and better aligns current assets, while also addressing significant gaps in capacity and opportunity.
- Develop common goals, shared results and metrics and clearly articulated action steps to more systematically address trauma and toxic stress in young children, families and the broader population.
- Seek a balance between resources going into intervention (identifying and responding to those who have already experienced toxic stress) and resources going to efforts that will promote healthy development and prevent more children from experiencing toxic stress.
- Identify and work to obtain potential sources of sustainable funding, including the potential of repurposing current funding to better incorporate both preventive and trauma-informed approaches.



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