



# COMMUNITY APPROACHES TO TOXIC STRESS

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY



On March 29, 2017, CBLCC (Children's Bureau Learning & Coordination Center) hosted a Digital Dialogue with Cailin O'Connor from the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The conversation deepened understanding of toxic stress, how it impacts young children, and the need to move beyond a focus on individuals and incidents to a more systemic look at environmental and community contexts. Below is what we heard from some of the 111 individuals from around the country who joined the call.

## Poll Question 1: HOW MIGHT AN UNDERSTANDING OF TOXIC STRESS LEAD US TO CHANGE THE WAY WE GO ABOUT OUR PREVENTION WORK?

The Digital Dialogue began with an overview of toxic stress, what the research tells us about its impacts, and how it ties into the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Participants were asked to share reflections on this last point. Responses fell into two broad categories:

- Implications for how we work with families:
  - Recognizing the multigenerational aspect of toxic stress and using it to inform a whole-family approach.
  - Reinforcing an emphasis on protective factors—and resilience, in particular—in our approach to working with families.
  - Understanding the experience of toxic stress from a family perspective.
    - How do we educate about toxic stress without undercutting culture and beliefs?
    - What are family perspectives and barriers to change?
- Implications of toxic stress for addressing the contributing role of societal and structural issues:
  - Looking at intersections among public policies around issues such as food assistance (SNAP), public housing, and other benefits that help to alleviate or contribute to toxic stress.
  - Examining the research on social determinants of health and the research on toxic stress.
  - Focusing on geographic areas of concentrated poverty.

*"Toxic stress is the strong and prolonged activation of the body's stress response system in the absence of adequate support to help a child cope."*

*-Cailin O'Connor*



- Providing concrete support for families who are facing deportation or anxiety about their status in the current political climate.
- Increasing cross-sector work and cross-community work.

## Poll Question 2: WHERE DO WE SEE PARENTS TAKING STEPS TO PREVENT AND/OR RESPOND TO TOXIC STRESS IN THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

The speaker emphasized the central role of parents in helping to buffer the impact of toxic stress on children. Participants were asked to provide examples of the ways in which they saw parents already coming together to prevent and respond to toxic stress.

- Most commonly cited were group events associated with parenting education and parenting support activities, such as Parents as Teachers Group Connections, Circle of Parents activities, family literacy programs, Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) or home visiting group events, and Parent Cafés.
- Schools, Head Start, and Early Head Start socialization events were mentioned.
- Community institutions such as faith organizations, libraries, spaces like the YMCA, and activities like scouting were also mentioned.
- One participant also highlighted community organizing efforts around racial justice, immigration, and other issues.

### Locate our resources:

- Access the [Digital Dialogue recording and handouts](#)
- Go to the [Center for the Study of Social Policy home page](#)

## Poll Question 3: WHAT ARE WE ALREADY DOING IN OUR COMMUNITIES TO PREVENT THE CONDITIONS THAT CAN GENERATE A TOXIC STRESS RESPONSE IN PARENTS AND THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN?

Participants were asked for examples of what they were already doing to prevent toxic stress:

- Participants focused primarily on interventions focused on parenting, such as home visiting (frequently cited), parenting education and support programs (several specific parenting interventions cited), and mutual support programs.
- A few participants named more systemic efforts to educate and engage parents, develop parent ambassadors or mentors, or create cross-sector, county-wide groups that align community efforts.

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