



Framing Strategies For Effectively Communicating About Toxic Stress: **Answers to Tough Questions**

Framing involves making choices about how to deliver a message: what to emphasize, how to explain critical concepts, and even what to leave unsaid. Below we model answers to tough questions from different audiences including the general public, parents and the media.

General Questions

Question

These stressful situations seem so bad, can anything be done?

Answer

When children experience lots of stress, it can have negative effects. Over time and without supports, children who experience lots of stress are more likely to have more health problems later in life. But poor outcomes are not certain—every child is different in how they respond to stress. Helping families ensure that children have supportive relationships with adults is one way to build resilience in the face of the potentially harmful impacts of toxic stress.

Tip

Avoid deterministic language and emphasize resilience and solutions to avoid “damage is done” thinking.



Question**What can science tell us about healthy childhood development and the role of stress?**

Answer

In recent years we have learned a lot about how stress can impact the developing brain. We know that a toxic stress response can impact healthy development, with potential for long-term impacts on children's health and wellbeing. But we have also learned a lot and developed strategies, like innovative family coaching and therapy programs, supports to help meet basic needs, and stress-reduction techniques, that can help.

Tip

Do not simply appeal to scientific authority. Instead focus on the problem-solving function of scientific inquiry.

Question**If my child has experienced stress, does it mean they will end up with health problems?**

Answer

Not necessarily. All children (and adults!) are different, and that's also true for how our bodies react to stress. Significant, long-lasting stress certainly increases the chance of later health problems, but it's not a sure thing. Often there are simple things that can boost a child's progress. The first thing we can do is notice it. If a specialist has raised a concern about your child's development, don't worry, but don't wait to act. Look forward, not backward. To support your child, together we can learn what we can do to support her. We are here as a resource for you.

Tip

Balance discussions of toxic stress with discussions of resilience. Along with explaining that adverse experiences can pose lifelong learning, development, and health, frames must consistently advance a sense that, with the right supports, individuals have the capacity to thrive in spite of adverse life experiences.

Question**I am so stressed out and I know my child feels it. Am I a bad parent?**

Answer

When we experience too much stress, it can feel like we are a truck that is overloaded. It can feel almost impossible to get everything done and to be the parent we want to be. But these are the times where we can look to supports around us that can help us offload some of that stress and make sure we are not carrying so much weight. And if accessing community services feels like too much right now, even small steps may be the best way to start. Take some deep breaths. Play peek-a-boo with your child. Share how you're feeling with a friend, family member, counselor, or religious advisor.

Tip

Point to how stressful experiences—rather than individual character or willpower—can impact parenting by using the overloaded metaphor. And be sure to include concrete steps people can take to help.

Question**Do my family's problems mean that I just need to work to be a better parent?**

Answer

When we take on difficult challenges in our lives, such as dealing with the effects of trauma, we need to depend on other people. Instead of suffering alone or trying to be a better parent without any help, we need to recognize that everyone needs support. We can help find ways to help you access that support.

Tip

Use the value of Interdependence to help communicate the idea that while individuals can take actions to improve their circumstances, all people need support. That support becomes even more critical when dealing with challenging life circumstances. Be concrete and specific about the kinds of support that might be available.

Question**It's unfortunate that parents cannot protect children from hardship, but why get pediatricians involved?**

Answer

All parents want what is best for their children. The weight of things like extreme poverty can overload a parent's ability to provide the supportive relationships children need. Just as a truck can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward, life's challenges can slow parents down, making it hard for them to provide the best kinds of care and support. As pediatricians, we have regular contact with families and we have relationships with care coordinators, so we can help support them and offload their stress.

Tip

To avoid the tendency to blame parents for children's challenges and difficulties, take time to point to the social determinants of toxic stress, such as poverty, racial discrimination, or lack of access to adequate health and mental health care. Avoid language that may inadvertently stigmatize parents, such as focusing on their behaviors that may impede caregiving.

Question**If more parents know about this, would that help to address toxic stress?**

Answer

There are lots of ways that people and communities can address the sources of stress in our lives, especially with young children. Community-based supports that address stressors that many parents experience is a good start—family resource centers, free activities, food and diaper banks for example. Lots of communities are thinking of new, creative, and innovative ways to make sure every parent has the supports they need.

Tip

This question stems from the idea that parents who are struggling lack knowledge about how to effectively parent. When this way of thinking is prompted, people think that the only solution is for people with expertise to instill more or better information. Avoid this top-down understanding by using the Community Strength value.
