

# INTRODUCING IT: Toxic Stress - Introduction: A Story for Early Childhood Educators



**WATCH IT** (9:15 minutes.) Please note: The video is silent until :53.

[Toxic Stress - Introduction: A Story for Early Childhood Educators](#) (Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services, 2014)

**This video gives a quick overview of how behavior has been managed over the last 75 years, and how we can make room for what recent brain research tells us about the impact of trauma on behavior.** Many of us were taught to think of managing behavior in children through using rewards and punishment, or, through encouraging or discouraging behavior. New research from the last 10 years has shown that traumatic stress impacts behavior, so a new approach to working with behavior is needed.

**Extend your TRY IT! learning** through watching a few short videos that go more deeply into the impact toxic stress has on young children's developing brains. You'll also find a useable handout offering ideas on responding to children dealing with traumatic separation and grief as a result of COVID-19.

## KNOW IT

Here are the **important ideas** this resource offers:

- Important adults in a child's life can both identify stress in the child and act as a buffer against the stress by offering a loving, supportive relationship.
- Challenging behavior can be an indication a child has or is experiencing high levels of stress.
- Up through the 1950s, children's challenging behavior was handled primarily through using strict discipline. Punishment was believed to be the best way to handle challenging behavior.
- In the 1970s, B.F. Skinner's approach to managing behavior through rewards and avoidance emerged. Brain science was just beginning, and influenced the adoption of this kind of behavior modification.
- In the 1990s, brain science developed further. Behavior was seen as communication. Functional behavioral analysis (FBA) emerged. FBA is a method for an adult to figure out what behavior was trying to say and either encourage or stop it through teaching different behaviors.
- In the 2010s, the impact of toxic trauma became a part of brain science. Research showed the brain's development and subsequent behavior are affected by traumatic stress.
- Brains that are constantly activated by toxic stress tell us "I'm scared all the time. I will push you away or I will run away. Then no one can ever get close to me."
- Other behavior modification techniques do work, but they often don't get to the core of why or what the behavior is communicating.
- Attachment and love, are in many ways, one and the same; children exposed to toxic stress need unconditional love from important care providers to help correct the way they show their response to the world.

Here is a **term** in the resource that may not be familiar to you:

**Attachment** is the relationship a very young child develops with at least one primary caregiver. Secure attachment permits normal social and emotional development to occur.



## RECALL IT

Let's see what you learned from this resource! The answers are provided at the end of the guide.

1. **True or false:** Nothing can protect a child's brain from the effects of toxic stress.
2. **True or false:** Punishment is a positive way to change children's behavior.
3. **True or false:** Behavior modification techniques can be effective in changing children's behavior.
4. **True or false:** Toxic stress is when the brain experiences ongoing, highly elevated levels of stress.



## THINK ABOUT IT

Take a few minutes to consider these questions. If you want to, write your thoughts down.

1. Think about how you were raised, and the form of discipline you typically experienced as a child. Now think about how you were trained to think about disciplining young children as a professional. How do these two perspectives color the way you think about behavior and discipline now? As you have learned about challenging behavior in children, do you continue to see it as something for which we use discipline? Why or why not?

2. Think about the ways you might use behavior modification. How do you support or discourage behaviors? Now think about this technique in relation to the brain telling us it feels unsafe or stressed. How might this new perspective impact the way you think about modifying a child's behavior? How would you consider using this new information with what you currently do?

 **TRY IT!**

Here are some ideas to try:

1. This video shared how we can use our understanding of toxic stress in choosing the techniques we use to work with challenging behavior. To learn more about how the brain develops and how toxic stress impacts it and prevents it from operating well, watch these three [short videos](#) from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard.
2. COVID-19 has created a world that is filled with many unknowns and uncertainty. It has placed additional demands on us, and for many, resulted in different forms of loss and severe physical threat. Loss and grief are traumatic events for us. We see this trauma play out in children's behavior. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network developed a tip sheet that offers age-appropriate ways to help us identify trauma-related behavior, and how we can support young children through a loving relationship – take a look at **Handout #1 – Helping Children with Traumatic Separation or Traumatic Grief Related to COVID-19**.

RECALL IT! Answers: 1. F 2. F 3. T 4. T