Rethinking Young Child 'Neglect' from a Science-Informed, Two-Generation Framework

A Workshop for Practitioners and Funders

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A Few Fast Facts

Recently, the national child welfare caseload included about 320,000 cases of substantiated neglect involving young children between ages of birth and six years. Of these, about 100,000 were infants.

That's equal to about 2500 school buses carrying only infants or three football stadiums full of babies…

Across the nation, neglect accounts for 60-80% of substantiated cases overall.

Defining Neglect:

Acts of Omission by the Grown Ups in a Child's Life

Physical Neglect	• Abandonment • Not providing for basic needs (nutrition, clothing hygiene)
Emotional Neglect	• Isolating the child; Not providing affection or emotional support • Exposing child to domestic violence or substance abuse
Medical Neglect	• Delaying or denying recommended health care
Educational Neglect	• Failing to enroll child in school or to home school • Ignoring special needs or permitting chronic absenteeism
Inadequate Supervision	• Leaving a child unsupervised; Not protecting from safety hazards • Inadequate caregiving; Engaging in harmful behavior

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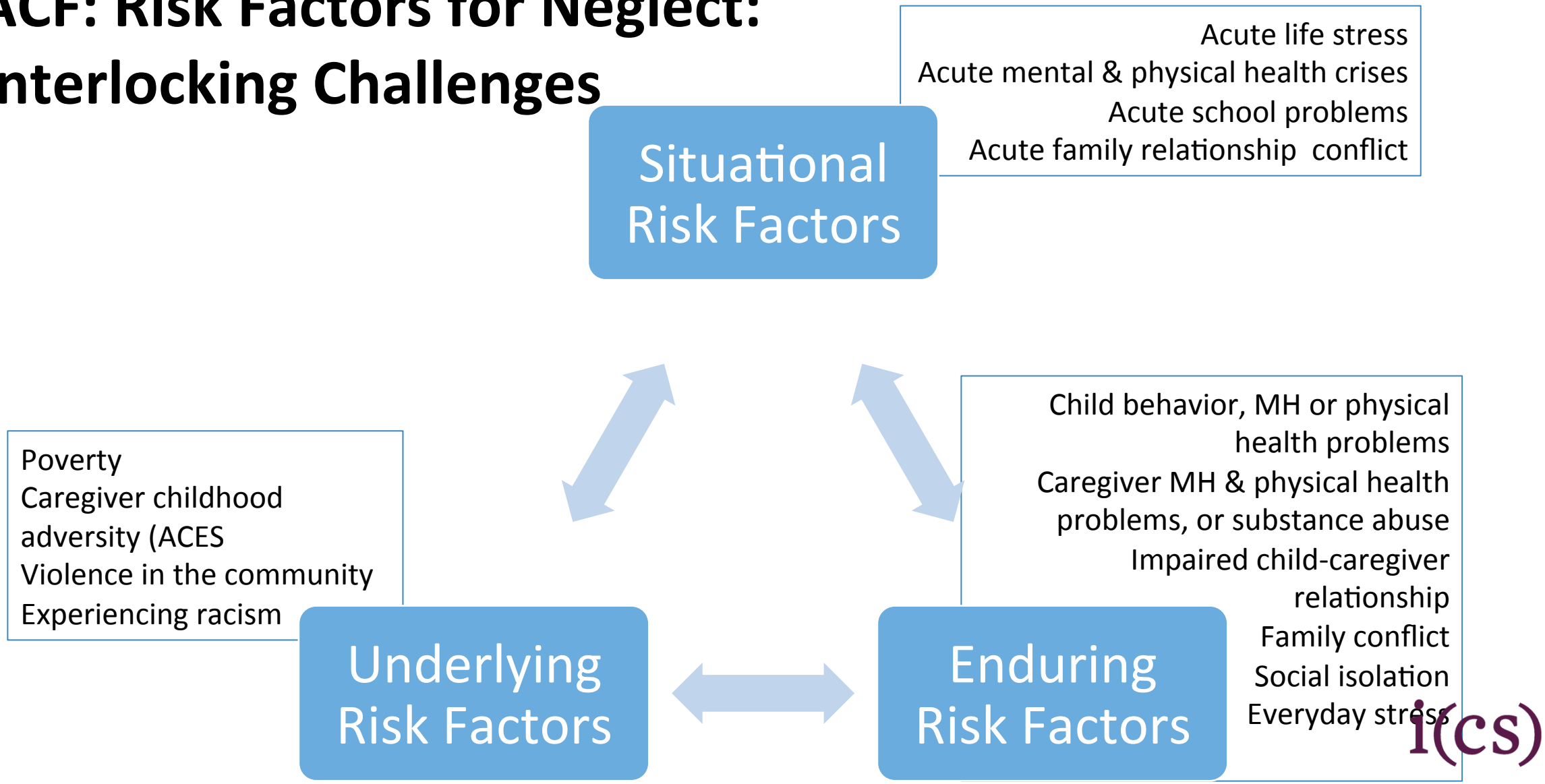
ACF: Risk Factors for Neglect: Interlocking Challenges



The Special Case of Chronic Risk: The Pile-On Effect

ACF: Chronic risk is an 'ongoing, serious pattern of deprivation' of a child's basic needs that results in 'accumulation of harm.' Chronic neglect can be hard to identify and treat; affected families face complex ongoing problems that require specialized, often long-term interventions and coordinated community support."

Harvard: "Extensive biological and developmental research shows significant neglect—the ongoing disruption or significant absence of caregiver responsiveness—can cause more lasting harm to a young child's development than overt physical abuse, including subsequent cognitive delays, impairments in executive functioning, and disruption of the body's stress response."

The Special Case of Poverty

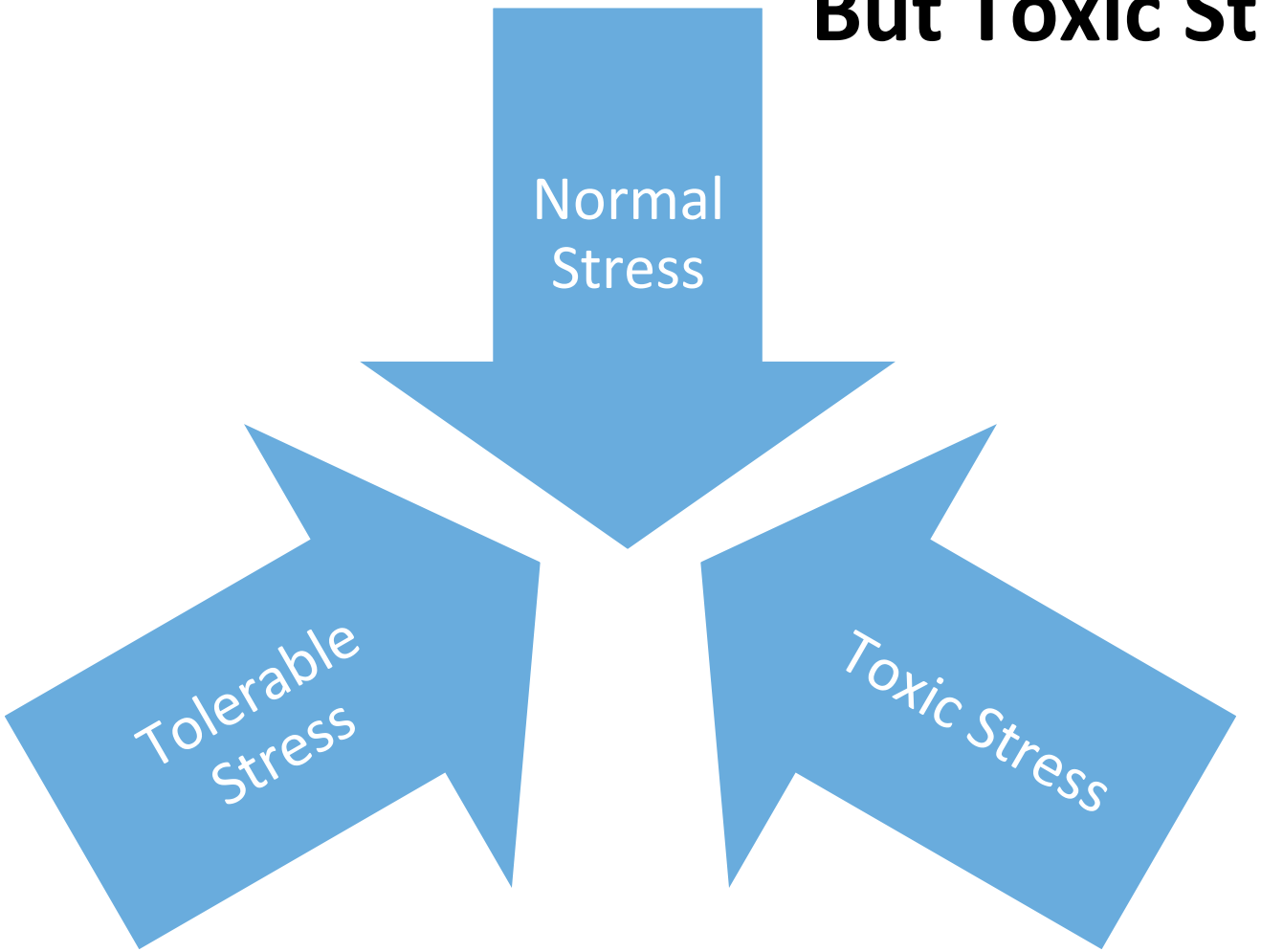
Poverty Can Disable Parenting, Resulting in Acts of Omission

"When parents struggle to provide for the day-to-day necessities of their children, they can feel anxious, depressed, fearful, and overwhelmed. The stress of living in harsh, deprived conditions can have a disabling effect on parenting capacities, resulting in inconsistent discipline, failure to respond to a child's emotional needs, or failure to prevent or address a potential for safety."

Poverty Can Change the Biology of Bodies

"Living with chronic poverty can create biochemical changes in brain functioning of both adults and children that negatively impact their health, mental health, and executive functioning. The impact of these biological changes is most significant for children in their early years because that is when brain growth is most rapid and the neural architecture is expanding and solidifying."

We All Have Stress, But Toxic Stress Has A Very Long Arm

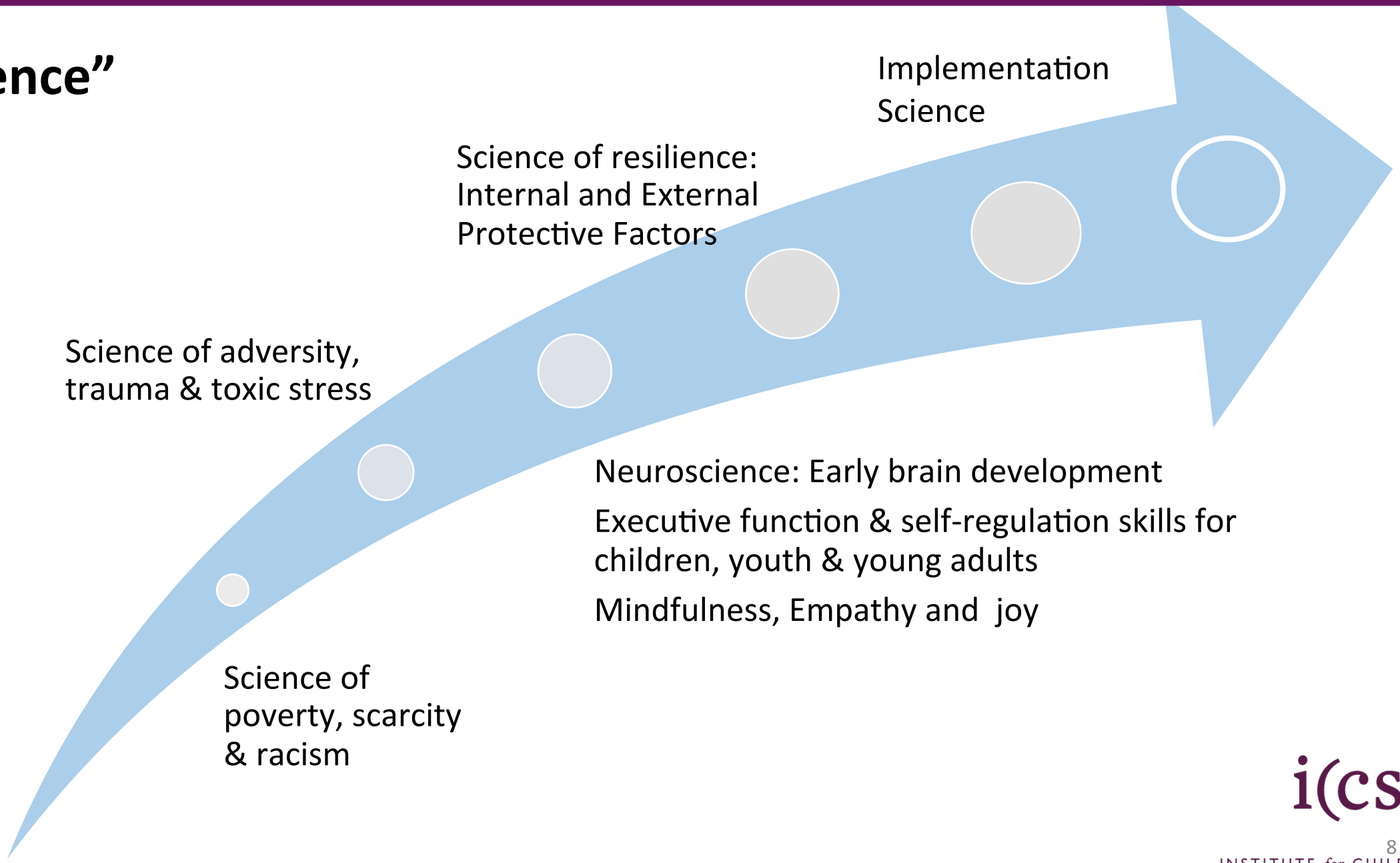


Normal: Getting immunized; Meeting new people; Starting something new

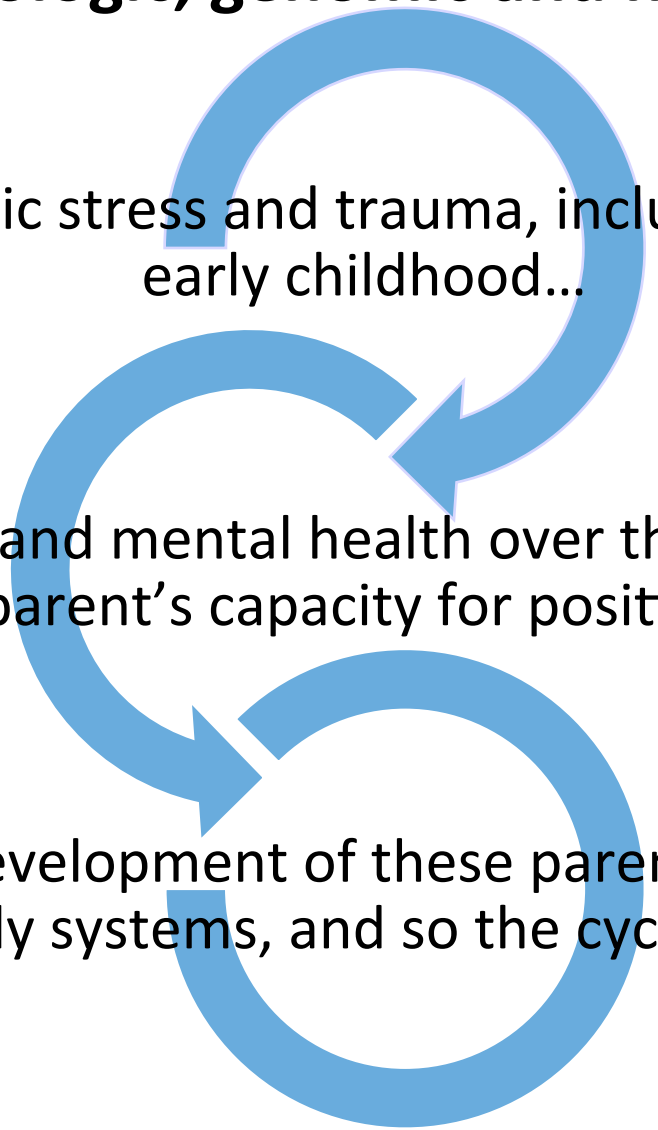
Tolerable: Serious Illness; Death of a loved one; Frightening accident; Acrimonious divorce; Persistent discrimination

Toxic Stress: Tolerable stress that is not buffered by caring, actively present adult persons or peers. The body's stress system activates and stays at high levels "like revving a car's engine for hours every day." Can cause damage at the cellular level, impact on health and mental health, and pass from one generation to the next.

"Science"


Implementation Science
Science of resilience: Internal and External Protective Factors
Science of adversity, trauma & toxic stress
Neuroscience: Early brain development
Executive function & self-regulation skills for children, youth & young adults
Mindfulness, Empathy and joy
Science of poverty, scarcity & racism

The neuroscience *really* matters because negative effects of toxic stress and trauma can impact our neurologic, genomic and hormonal systems across generations…



Adversity, toxic stress and trauma, including poverty, in early childhood…

Can impact adult health and mental health over the lifetime and can negatively impact a parent's capacity for positive parenting…

Which impact the development of these parents young children's brains and body systems, and so the cycle continues…

What can we do that is BETTER than the best we have done so far?

We Can Make Sensible Changes in Our Policies and Programs

Use the Science

- Adopt a two-gen science-informed Theory of Change to guide data-development and use, fiscal investment, professional development and support, and policy advocacy with the executive, legislative and judicial branches

Find Problems Early

- Assure the early identification of health, behavioral and developmental delays and address challenges in children's first five years, including in language development, mental health, and early behavioral self-regulation

Address Stress

- Provide or fund "evidence-based" services and support that effectively address the impact of ACES, toxic stress and depression on parental caregiving capacity, kinship foster families, and child welfare other front-line case workers and supervisory staff

Build a Connected System

- Invest in a two-gen data-informed intergenerational, cross-sector service system designed to (a) reduce our own negative impact on families and (b) strengthen family skills as their children's primary caregivers and teachers

We Can Adopt Multi-Generational, Science-Informed Practices

Wrap Around the Family Unit

- Community supports and services are delivered to the child and parent (or other primary caregiver) simultaneously as well as individually, and are wrapped around the family as a whole.

Take the Time Needed

- Support may extend for one or two years, and sometimes longer.
- When stressors are chronic and toxic, longer is needed.

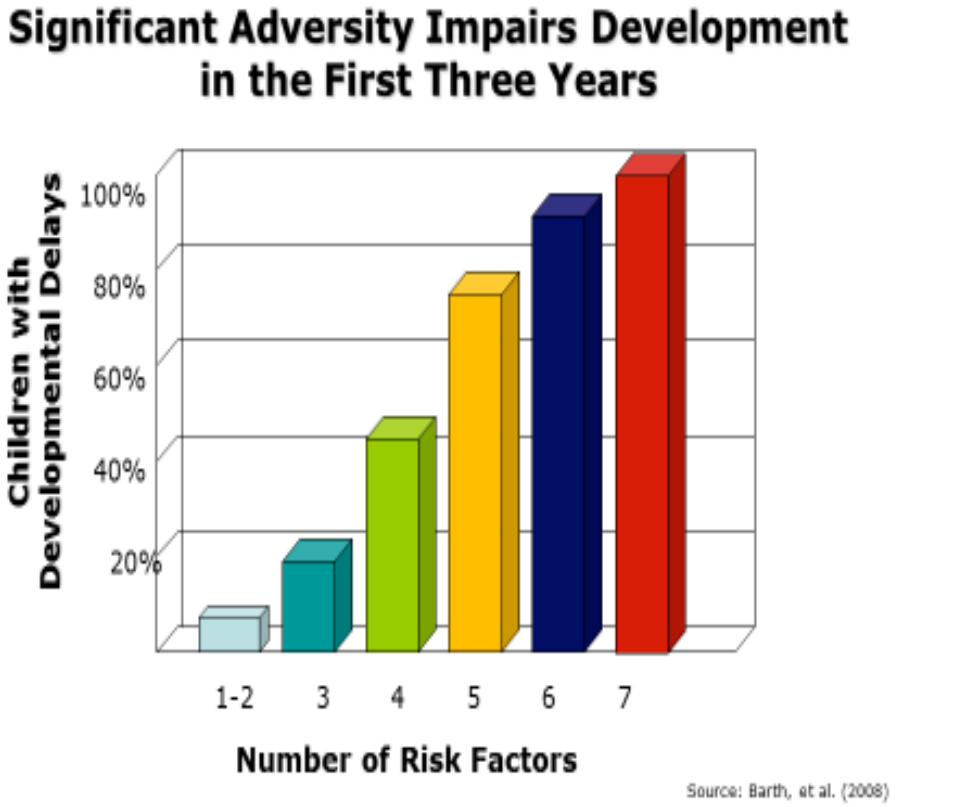
Focus on Strengths and Resilience

- Services and supports quickly focus on individual and family strengths and assets, including within the extended family
- Build on community protective factors including peer networks

Building Family Power through Teaming

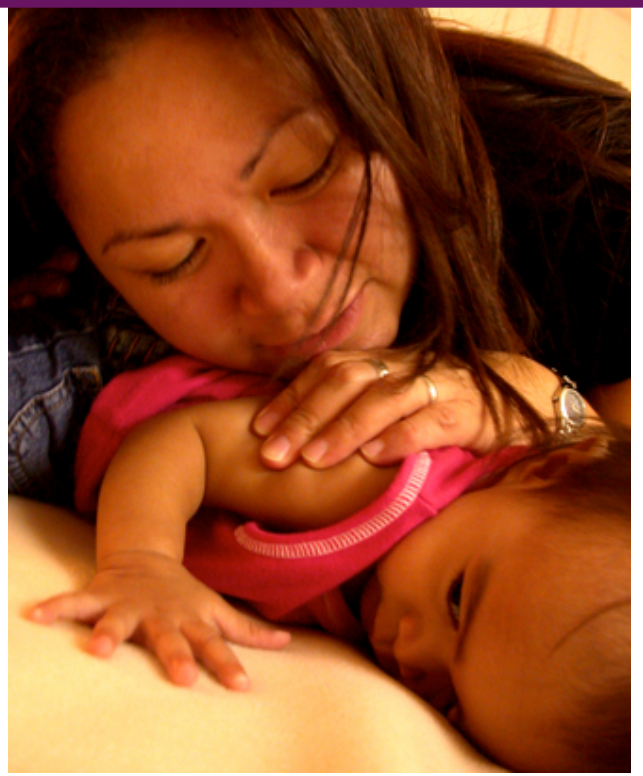
- "Power" passes to the family as we encourage and support family decision-making
- Provide information to families so our practice and processes are transparent

If we don't rethink young child 'neglect'…



We will continue to see:

- Too many babies born into circumstances where families struggle to meet their needs
- Racial, ethnic, income, health and education disparities that continue across generations
- Schools problems will continue to include lack of school readiness, chronic absenteeism, behavioral incidents
- Child welfare "kin care" may fail because of lack of knowledge and investment in extended families
- The prevalence of risk factors for 'neglect' that are way too high leaving our youngest children way too vulnerable.



No excuses…..We can do this, together

Useful Resources from the Institute for Child Success

Gruendel, J., Cagle, B. and Baker, H.
Rethinking Young Child 'Neglect' from a Science-Informed, Two-Generation Perspective (November 2015)

Gruendel, J.
Designing for Outcomes through a Two-Generation Lens: Good Science and Good Common Sense (March 2015)

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