

Press Release: Toxic stress poses a major risk to children's early development

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Cape Town – How many times have we heard the old saying “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger”. Right? Wrong. Especially in the first 1,000 days of life – the period from conception through to the age of 2 years.

With Child Protection Week currently underway in South Africa, more attention should be directed at the extremely harmful effects of high stress on the brain development of young children.

“Not all stress is bad. However, in early childhood, persistent adversity coupled with inadequate adult care and nurturing, causes long lasting structural damage to the developing brain. This is called toxic stress,” says Sonja Giese, programme leader at *Ilifa Labantwana*, a national early childcare development programme.

Giese added that understanding the impact of stress on early brain development is one of the recent breakthroughs in neuroscience.

During the first few years of life, the brain is developing at a remarkable rate with hundreds of new ‘connections’ being made every second. These connections provide either a strong foundation or a weak foundation for all later brain development. When young children experience toxic levels of stress, the early connections in the brain are adversely affected, laying down a weak foundation, according to the *Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University*.

In South Africa, high levels of violence, child abuse and severe neglect are literally shaping the brains of our youngest citizens, with potentially devastating effects on learning, behaviour, and health across their lifespan.

“As we look at ways of strengthening child protection in South Africa, there are lessons to draw from neuroscience,” says Giese. “In some communities children are routinely exposed to high levels of violence and ongoing stress. But this is just one half of the equation for toxic stress. The other half of the equation is the absence of responsive care and nurturing from a consistent adult.”

When a child is stressed or cries and an adult responds appropriately with hugging, eye contact and encouraging words, the neural connections in the child's brain are strengthened. This kind of caregiving prevents levels of stress in the child from reaching toxic proportions, even under very stressful circumstances.

“With the spotlight on child protection this week, it is important for us to understand that as parents and caregivers of young children we play a critical role in protecting children from the long term consequences of today's violence. It is within our power to help shape the lives of our children by helping to shape healthy brains in infancy,” says Giese.

For more information or to arrange an interview with Sonja Giese, contact:
Svetlana Doneva, Communication Manager for Ilifa Labantwana
0827976103/svetlana@dgmt.co.za

Notes for Editors:

Ilifa Labantwana is a national programme, initiated and supported by a donor partnership, which aims to provide implementation evidence, build national capacity and galvanise informed political support for the provision of early childhood development services at scale, focusing on the poorest 40% of children under six.
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