

Summary Brief



In order to help support families with young children who are dealing with significant stress, it's vital to build their understanding of how stress affects development; foster openness to participation in services for themselves and their families, and empower them to advocate on behalf of their communities. These services are crucial, yet many individuals are reluctant to access them, in part because of deeply held beliefs about how trauma impacts their lives and their capacity for resilience, as well as a lack of self-efficacy and empowerment.

This toolkit identifies a set of framing strategies that can more effectively communicate the science with these audiences in ways that acknowledge their dignity, their capacity for resilience, and ultimately allow them to serve as agents of change, both for themselves and their communities. The research behind this toolkit, conducted by FrameWorks for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, begins with the premise that individuals with histories of lifelong adversity do not engage with clinicians and direct service providers as “blank slates.” Rather, they implicitly bring their past experiences and prior knowledge to the way they think and talk about the effects of lifelong stress and the actions they take to address it in their lives. Our goal is to more effectively communicate key concepts from the science of development, not only to build public understanding but also to leave affected individuals feeling empowered about their health and wellbeing.

The strategies in this ToolKit are designed to help advocates, pediatricians, direct service providers, and other frontline professionals to more effectively communicate the science of development with members of communities dealing disproportionately with economic and socio-cultural disadvantage. For more information, see “Strategies for Effectively Communicating about Toxic Stress: A FrameWorks Message Brief” (April 2019).



Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**Communicating about
Toxic Stress Toolkit**

Putting It All Together

Using the recommendations in this ToolKit, you can mix and match various framing elements, depending on the circumstances and needs of your context.

The recommendations include:

- Don't talk about toxic stress without also explaining people's capacity for resilience.
- Use the metaphor of "being overloaded by stress" to emphasize that anyone would be hampered by such challenging conditions, and there are solutions (unloading the burdens).
- Acknowledge both steps individuals can take (to build self-efficacy) and societal solutions (to avoid over-individualizing).

One example of successfully combining these recommendations and framing elements can be found in this sample message about a fictional, community-based initiative.

Building the resilience and strength of our communities is one of the most important investments we can make. Chronic and unrelenting stress can impact our health and wellbeing long after we experience it, especially if it happens when we are young. Later in life, stressors can feel like weights that overload us when we try and get through our day. Stress can also make it hard to get through one of the most challenging jobs of all—parenting.

Science can provide us with the knowledge, tools, and expertise to make sure everyone in our communities can develop well. With your help and participation in the Resilient Communities project, we can lift the weight of toxic stress from families and help prevent the root causes of stress in our neighborhoods. Together, we can build resilience children, families, and communities. Join us for the next community meeting.