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July 7, 2021 John Peters II Opinion 0

By Charlotte Reeves Guest Columnist



Editor's Note: This is one of a series of columns to be shared with Mount Airy News readers by the Surry County Substance Abuse Recovery Office.

WEATHER

Mount Airy, NC 27030

Weather	Wind	Rain	Sun	M
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71.6 °F
Chance Thunderstorms

68 °F 89 °F

66 75 THU	66 86 FRI	67 89 SAT
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A child's experiences early in life are important building blocks for the developing brain. Genes and nature are the blueprint and provide the basic framework for brain development. However, genes do not design the brain completely. Environmental influences and nurture fine tune how the brain works by shaping which brain connections get used. Connections that are used more frequently grow stronger and more permanent, and those that do not get used as much fade away. Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships, early in life, lead to healthy development.

Children's brains capture other experiences as well, such as stressful events. However not all stress is bad. Positive stress involves normal childhood experiences such as starting daycare or meeting a new person for the first time. This type of stress is essential for healthy development because it helps children develop coping skills and confidence. But when stress is frequent, chronic, and uncontrolled it becomes toxic to children, especially when they do not have a caregiver to offer support or buffer the stress.

Adverse Childhood Experiences also known as "ACEs," such as abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, parental substance use disorder, parental mental health issues, and poverty are toxic stressors that can lead to lifelong changes in learning and behavior. ACEs, early in development, can impact social, emotional, and cognitive functioning, increase risk-taking behavior, such as drinking and substance use, and increase the risk of disease, disability, and/or social problems later in life.

One of the most important systems in our body is our sympathetic nervous system, which is activated when we experience stress. Under stress we become more alert, heartrate increases, as does our stress hormones – cortisol and adrenaline, frequently resulting in a "fight or flight" response. If a child receives support from a caregiver, following a stressful event the child's sympathetic nervous system turns off and the body returns to a normal state. ACEs create stress responses in children that remain active. Without caregiver support, the child's system has difficulty shutting off completely. This constant and prolonged stress activation can affect immune system functioning and increase the child's chances of sickness, infection, and disease.

Prolonged activation of stress hormones is also toxic to the brain. Certain areas of the brain are more vulnerable to toxic stress, including the "executive center," or the brain's control center, an area responsible for solving complex problems, attention, reasoning, impulsivity, inhibition, and learning. Another area effected by prolonged stress the "emotional center." This is the alarm center, which processes and interpret emotions, and controls impulses.

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Another area, the “memory and learning center,” is the brain’s filing cabinet, which plays a major role in learning, and the formation and retrieval of memories. When ACEs affect these areas of brain, the child will experience emotional distress, poor emotion regulation, greater impulsivity, learning difficulties, and physical and mental health problems.

If you, or someone you know, would benefit from learning more about ACEs, contact Charlotte Reeves, Surry County Community Outreach Coordinator, at reevesc@co.surry.nc.us. Visit our website at surrycountycare.com for more information about substance abuse disorder (SUD) and the many resources available in our County.

Charlotte Reeves is the Community Outreach Coordinator for Surry County Substance Abuse Recovery Office. She may be reached at 336-401-8218 or reevesc@co.surry.nc.us.



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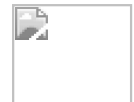
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