



Stress: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Keryn O'Neill, MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager

We often hear that pēpi and young tamariki are resilient and can cope with the stresses in their lives and the lives of whānau. However, we now understand that stress can have a range of effects, from healthy to harmful.



Positive stress provides a tamaiti with opportunities to develop resilience and coping skills, helping them to better manage stress in the future.

Stress experienced by tamariki can affect their health and development for life. Many areas can be negatively affected including mental and physical wellbeing, as well as the structure and functioning of the brain.

Understanding stress in tamariki is crucial for their development and wellbeing, particularly because it enables adults to understand the importance of providing appropriate support, and to promote positive development.

What is stress?

Simply put, stress is the way our bodies respond when we feel challenged or threatened.¹ Both our physiology and our behaviour change to meet the threat and to help us to survive.

Tamariki feel stress differently from adults; their limited life experience and their developmental stage both influence their perception of stress. It's easy for us to underestimate situations that tamariki find highly stressful, and their impact.² We may have experienced these situations many times before, but they are still very new for them.

Levels of stress

All stress is not created equal. One way of understanding stress faced by tamariki is to see it as falling in one of three levels; positive, tolerable and toxic.³

1. Positive stress

Positive stress occurs when:

- the stress is moderate
- the body's stress response is relatively short-lived, and
- the tamaiti is supported by a loving adult.⁴

Positive stress tends to happen in situations that are common for their age.⁵ It can help them to learn some appropriate reactions. Things such as dealing with frustration, getting an immunisation, or not having the sweets conveniently within reach from the supermarket trolley provide a tamaiti with opportunities to develop resilience and coping skills, helping them to better manage stress in the future.⁶ They are an important part of healthy development, when they occur in the context of loving, positive relationships.⁷



The role of important adults in the child's world during stressful times is incredibly powerful.

2. Tolerable stress

The next level of stress is called tolerable. This refers to situations where the degree of stress experienced, and its impact on their body, could potentially affect the child's health and development. Examples of the types of events that could fall in this category include the death of a loved one, serious illness in the family, parental divorce, natural disaster or hospitalisation. However, these events tend to occur for shorter periods of time, and a key factor separating tolerable stress from toxic stress is the availability of at least one adult who can provide the emotional support the tamaiti needs to recover.

Tamariki need someone they can rely on who is able to see the situation from the child's perspective and act accordingly. This is not easy when parents are struggling with their own reactions to a significant event such as a death or natural disaster. As with any other aspect of parenting, perfection is not needed, but a history of secure relationships and a committed adult able to meet the child's emotional needs most of the time will contribute to a lasting positive impact for the tamaiti. The role of important adults in the child's world at such times is incredibly powerful.

3. Toxic stress

Stressful events that are severe or ongoing, or those where the tamaiti lacks enough adult support, may have a lasting negative effect on their physical and mental health.⁸ This is called toxic stress.

Toxic stress depends on how strong and how long the stress response is, and not to the cause of the stress.⁹ It can lead to a wide range of bodily changes which is why its effects can be so varied and widespread.¹⁰

In the early days of learning about toxic stress, its effects on children's brains had a lot of attention. We now know that the effects are much broader, and that toxic stress can affect any biological system, including their metabolism and immune system.¹¹

When stress is ongoing, tamariki may outwardly appear to have become used to the stressful situation and not respond as they did initially, but this does not necessarily mean they are no longer affected. Their body may still be affected by prolonged exposure to stress.

The rapid development of pēpi means that toxic stress can be particularly harmful at this time.¹² Being too young to talk about stress, does not mean being too young to be affected by it.



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Individual differences

The effects of stress differ for different tamariki even if they have been exposed to similar events. Several things influence how a tamaiti is affected by stress. These include, their:

- genes¹³
- gender
- age and developmental stage
- previous stressful experiences
- family and community support, and
- interactions between their genes, environment and the timing of the stress.¹⁴

All of these can make a difference to the ways in which tamariki are affected. This is why, for example, siblings in a family can vary so much in how they are affected by a shared experience. It also means that the level and types of support tamariki need, during or after a highly stressful time, will be different.

These factors do not operate in isolation; they interact in complex ways to influence stress responses.

For example, a tamaiti whose genes make them more sensitive to stress may find stressful situations more overwhelming compared to their peers. However, if this tamaiti also has a strong support system and positive coping experiences, the negative impact of their sensitivity to stress might be lessened.

Balancing support and resilience

While the myth of resilience has likely contributed to far too many tamariki being left unsupported in toxic stressful situations, it seems that for some the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. One example is the type of children's birthday party where every tamaiti wins every game, and every tamaiti gets a pile of goodies to take home. While these practices likely reduce the number of tears shed at the party (and associated adult stress levels!) they are also a lost opportunity for tamariki to experience and learn from short-lived stressors. While it may seem like a fabulous idea in the short term to avoid upset, disappointed tamariki at all costs, the long-term implications are that tamariki have fewer opportunities to experience, and recover from, disappointment which may be less positive in the long run.

Rather than completely protecting tamariki from ordinary stresses they gain more by being supported through them.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, pēpi and tamariki need as much protection as possible from extreme or ongoing stress (e.g. witnessing family violence, parental substance abuse) as this can cause lasting harm.

When significant stressors can't be avoided (e.g. death of a family member, natural disaster), emotional support from loving adults is vital in protecting tamariki from possible negative outcomes.

Finally, short-term, everyday stressors (e.g. parental limit-setting, minor disappointment) are a valuable learning opportunity and tamariki benefit more from being supported through them, than from being overly protected from them.

Endnotes

1. Smith & Pollak, 2020
2. Davis & Soistmann, 2022
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014
4. Shonkoff, Boyce, Levitt, Martinez, & McEwen, 2021
5. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014; Shonkoff et al., 2021
6. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014; Shonkoff et al., 2021
7. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014
8. Smith & Pollak, 2020
9. Shonkoff et al., 2021
10. Garner, Yogman, et al., 2021
11. Boyce, Levitt, Martinez, McEwen, & Shonkoff, 2021
12. Rifkin-Graboi, Borelli, & Enlow, 2009
13. Boyce et al., 2021
14. Boyce et al., 2021; Engel & Gunnar, 2020; Shonkoff et al., 2021; Smith & Pollak, 2020

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Glossary of Māori words:

pēpi – baby, infant

tamariki – children

tamaiti – child

whānau – extended family

For more detailed information about stress and tamariki, see this

How Stress Affects Tamariki

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/how-stress-affects-tamariki/>

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<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/circle-of-security/>

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