

How severe, ongoing stress affects kids

By Lindsey Tanner, AP

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – A quiet, unsmiling little girl with big brown eyes crawls inside a carpeted cubicle, hugs a stuffed teddy bear tight, and turns her head away from the noisy classroom.

The safe spaces, quiet times and breathing exercises for her and the other preschoolers at the Verner Center for Early Learning are designed to help kids cope with intense stress so they can learn. But experts hope there's an even bigger benefit – protecting young bodies and brains from stress so persistent that it becomes toxic.

It's no secret that growing up in tough circumstances can be hard on kids and lead to behavior and learning problems. But researchers are discovering something different. Many believe that ongoing stress during early childhood – from grinding poverty, neglect, parents' substance abuse and other adversity – can smolder beneath the skin, harming kids' brains and other body systems. And research suggests that can lead to some of the major causes of death and disease in adulthood, including heart attacks and diabetes.

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