

By Barbara Holden

The sights, sounds, affection and stress levels experienced during the first three years of life literally mold the tiny, developing brains of our children and shape their future.

Specifically, 80 percent of your child's brain develops during this time and any exposure he has to traumatic and stressful experiences like abuse and neglect, or witnessing consistent violence and anger will impact who he is as an adult and how he deals with stress of his own.

A clear understanding of the tangible affects of stress, and finding a support system to deal with them, is vitally important, according to neurodevelopmental pediatrician and director of the Boling Center for Developmental Disabilities Frederick B. Palmer, MD.

Palmer says all families are exposed to basic levels of "positive" and "tolerable" stress. These are kind of events and experiences that try our patience and test our resilience. They are natural, and for the most part build character and allow us to grow.

But "toxic" stress is the kind that severely impedes a child's brain development and occurs though prolonged and frequent exposure to abuse, neglect, violence, or malnutrition.

This early childhood developmental poison is further strengthened when it is experienced without a buffer of supportive adults and a safe environment.

"Consistent early exposure to severe levels of stress keeps a baby's stress response system on a constant and unhealthy high, leading to disruptions in his emotional, cognitive and physical development," Palmer said.

"It is especially destructive without reliable and trusted relationships with parents and caring adults to help a child cope with the trauma."

Palmer says stress not only affects the brain of a young infant, it also occurs in the womb if the mother is smoking, drinking, using drugs or simply not getting the proper food and vitamins she needs.

We know that babies who are exposed to these extreme stresses and trauma in the womb have a greater chance of becoming users of drugs and alcohol, too. They also face a greater likelihood of depression, incarceration and even heart disease as adults – all that before they take their first breath on earth.

"It's all very scary, but the great news here is that so much of what eats away at your baby's emotional and cognitive development is preventable," Palmer said.

We know that healthy mothers who get plenty of folic acid in leafy greens and orange juice *before* pregnancy, and those who don't smoke or drink *during* pregnancy will deliver healthier babies.

We know that babies who are caressed, tickled, held and rocked by their mothers will experience enhanced emotional, social and cognitive development. They will be better prepared for school, are more likely to graduate and are better equipped to deal with stress as an adult.

Some of the most important things you can do for your baby's development include avoiding toxic stresses like cigarettes and alcohol, and seeking out a safe, supportive and loving environments free from violence and danger.

It sounds so simple and obvious, and it is. There are critical and sensitive times in during the early years of life where we can make the most difference for better - and for worse. Parents and caregivers must be vigilant during those first three years.

“Care of a child's developing brain is not just a key parenting role or caregiver role, I believe it's a key role of our entire community,” Palmer said.

“If you look back, you'll see that toxic stress and trauma caused by violence, abuse and neglect is sort of handed down from generation to generation, like dominos falling,” Palmer said. “We most certainly can stop that cycle. And we should commit to keeping even one more domino, one more generation from falling. Our very future depends on it.”

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.