

Evolving Frameworks for Pediatric Health

The AAP strongly recommends focusing on a relational health framework for pediatric well-being rather than a toxic stress framework.

The relational health framework builds on decades of research showing that the negative impacts of childhood adversity and stress can be buffered by safe, stable, nurturing relationships (SSNRs) that build and protect young children's interpersonal connections and emotional security. These factors advance physical health, social-emotional skills, learning, and resilience. Use this table as a quick reference to better understand the evolution and core ideas of these frameworks.

	Toxic Stress Framework	→	Relational Health Framework
Definition	<i>Toxic stress</i> refers to the biological processes that occur after the extreme or prolonged activation of the body's stress response systems in the absence of SSNRs.	→	<i>Relational health</i> refers to the capacity to develop and sustain SSNRs which can prevent the extreme or prolonged activation of stress response systems.
Contribution	Explains how many ACEs become biologically embedded and negatively alter life course trajectories.	→	Explains how SSNRs can buffer adversity and promote resiliency skills for the future.
Clinical Approach	A <u>deficits-based</u> approach. It focuses on a problem: the biological processes triggered by significant adversity in the absence of SSNRs.	→	A <u>strengths-based</u> approach. It focuses on solutions: the individual, family, and community capacities that can promote SSNRs, buffer adversity, and build resilience.
Primary Preventions	Focus on preventing the adversities that could precipitate a toxic stress response.	→	Focus on how to universally promote the development of SSNRs and resiliency skills.
Secondary Preventions	Focus on identifying individuals at high risk for poor outcomes resulting from toxic stress responses by using population-based risk factors (like ACEs scores) or emerging biomarkers (like methylation patterns).	→	Focus on identifying potential barriers to developing SSNRs for individuals, families, and communities by developing respectful and caring therapeutic relationships.
Tertiary Preventions	Focus on evidence-based practices to treat morbidities related to toxic stress like anxiety, depression, oppositional defiant disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse disorder.	→	Focus on evidence-based practices to repair strained relationships like attachment-behavioral catch-up, child-parent psychotherapy, or parent-child interaction therapy.
Summary	Toxic stress defines the <i>problem</i> and explains how many of our society's most intractable problems (like disparities in health, education, and economic stability) are rooted in our shared biology but differentiated by divergent experiences and opportunities.	→	Relational health defines the <i>solution</i> and explains how individual, family, and community capacities can support the development and maintenance of SSNRs, buffer adversity, and build resilience across the life course.