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Reducing Toxic Stress Experienced by Children Living in Poverty

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In my last President's Message I shared the five policy areas set by the Academy Board of Directors. They are:

- Reproductive Rights
- Environmental Health
- Violence Prevention
- Opioid Addiction
- Toxic Stress in Children

In this message I will focus on toxic stress in children.

What is toxic stress and why does it matter? First, toxic stress is the result of exposure to Adverse Childhood Events (ACE's). These events include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, intimate partner violence, mother treated violently, substance misuse within the household, potential separation or divorce, mental illness within the household, and incarcerated household member. And there is a dose response. The higher the number of ACE's, the higher the likelihood a child will experience significant episodes of toxic stress. This exposure to toxic stress has powerful and lifelong effects on physical and mental health. Revealed in a seminal study (1998)¹, those who had four or more ACE's were at increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide attempt, smoking, more than 50 sexual partners, depression, heart disease, obesity and liver disease.

We now know that prolonged exposure to toxic stress actually changes the brain architecture.² These changes can impact higher level functioning and decrease decision-making capacity. Framing this as the biologic impact of diversity helps to shift the conversation away from blaming individuals for making bad choices towards implementing system level changes that decrease exposure to toxic stress.

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