Providing Anticipatory Guidance on ACEs and Toxic Stress

Anticipatory guidance is an important part of supporting a positive, family-centered patient experience by providing information that encourages patients/caregivers be involved and invested in their health.

What Is Anticipatory Guidance?
Anticipatory guidance is education to patients/caregivers about what to expect, or anticipate, over the next few months or years with their child. Recommendations are specific to a child’s age at the time of a visit.

Why Provide Anticipatory Guidance on ACEs and Toxic Stress?
Providing anticipatory guidance helps patients/caregivers understand ACEs and toxic stress and be attuned to what types of home, school or other situations may be causing stress to a child. It gives them information they need to be able to identify potential symptoms of toxic stress early (e.g., difficulty focusing, weight gain/loss, poor control of asthma, poor sleep, anxiety, etc.). Anticipatory guidance can also increase a caregiver’s understanding of their role as a buffer to children’s stress and can help provide tools that caregivers can use to build their children’s resilience against adversity.

Patient education handouts to support anticipatory guidance*:

- Building Resilience
- Nutrition and Exercise
- What is ACEs Screening?
- Toxic Stress
- Self-Regulation

Tools and Strategies for a Productive Conversation
Using motivational interviewing strategies to encourage behavior change and adherence can be an effective way to approach a conversation about ACEs and toxic stress. Motivational interviewing, or collaborative decision making, is a guided conversation that allows the patient/caregiver to explore his/her thoughts and feelings about ACEs and toxic stress, identify what goals are personally important and how they might achieve those goals.

- **How to start:** You could respond to a patient or family member’s ACEs screening questionnaire by asking, “What questions or concerns do you have about this questionnaire?” This takes pressure off the pediatrician to intuit what type of anticipatory guidance might be relevant to this particular individual and sends a message that the visit is family-centered (as opposed to pediatrician-centered) and that the provider is not judgmental of the current living situation.

- **Stay focused:** To keep the visit family-centered, anticipatory guidance topics (e.g., toxic stress, resilience, nutrition and exercise) should be used as prompts to ask open-ended questions so that the parent and physician can have a timely, relevant, and appropriate discussion that meets everyone’s needs.
Motivational Interviewing Best Practices

- Use open-ended questions: Asking parents, children and adolescents these types of questions will model and encourage open and supportive communication.
  - For example, open ended questions:
    - Help start the conversation by asking “why,” “how” and “what”
    - Promote problem-solving
    - Stimulate thinking
- Affirm what the patient/caregiver says: “It sounds like you are really good at...”
- Allow time to respond: Wait at least 3 seconds to allow the family to respond to a question before trying to clarify or frame the question another way.
- Use active listening: Active listening is the process of giving full attention to the speaker and then reflecting back in a neutral/non-judgemental way what is said to demonstrate comprehension and to clarify. This will assist in identifying a family’s needs and concerns, including relevant, age-specific health topics.
- Recognize “teachable moments:” Clarify a family’s needs (parent and child), give personalized guidance, and seek and provide feedback.

References

Ashley E. Sens, MD; Kara Connors, MPH; Henry H. Bernstein, DO, Pediatric Annals; September 2011 - Volume 40 · Issue 9: 435-441.

American Academy of Pediatrics; Bright Futures. Anticipatory Guidance; available at: https://brightfutures.aap.org/materials-and-tools