A black background with a black square

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceTrauma-Informed Care: Key Terms

**Key Terms**



**What to do:** Use this list of terms to help staff understand trauma and its impact on children.

**Why it matters:** Using consistent language across student services can ensure a unified approach to addressing what may be very difficult experiences for students.

**Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE):** A stressful or traumatic event, including abuse or neglect, that occurs before a child reaches the age of 18. Other examples include witnessing domestic violence at home or growing up with family members who have substance use disorders. ACEs are strongly correlated with the development of many health problems over time, including those associated with substance misuse. See a useful graphic to share with stakeholders at the Harvard Center on the Developing Child website: [https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/.](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/)

**Complex Trauma:** The experience of facing multiple adversities over the course of a lifetime.

**Fixed Mindset:** The belief that one’s intelligence and abilities cannot change. The position that a person is or isn’t good at something based on inherent nature.

**Grit:** Courage and resolve; strength of character. The ability to persevere and show passion for long-term goals.

**Growth Mindset:** The belief that one’s intelligence and abilities can change and develop. The ability to perceive a challenge as an opportunity to learn, rather than an obstacle to overcome.

**Positive Stress:** A normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. Examples of positive stress include the first day of school or receiving an immunization shot.

**Resilience:** The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

**Stress:** A physical and emotional response to a stimulus, of which there are different types. The brain triggers an alarm response to situations perceived as possible threats and the body reacts by releasing hormones. Stress can look different depending on the individual; however, physical symptoms of stress can include headaches, back or chest pain, heart palpitations, sleep problems, or upset stomach. Emotional symptoms can include sadness, anger, irritability, anxiety, or lack of focus.

**Tolerable Stress:** The response to severe, long-lasting events like the loss of a loved one or natural disaster. The body’s biological systems (brain, organs, and hormones) are activated to a greater degree. If the time is limited and a child is protected by relationships with supportive adults, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.

**Toxic Stress:** Prolonged activation of the stress response system, likely from strong, frequent, or long-lasting difficult events or traumas, like physical or emotional abuse, exposure to violence, caregiver substance abuse, or acrimonious divorce. There will be little support from the caregiver during these instances. Toxic stress can disrupt brain building and other organ systems, and can increase the risk for stress-related disease and intellectual impairment throughout adult years.

**Trauma:** An event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury to a child or others, or a threat to the psychological or physical integrity of a child or others. The emotional, psychological, and physiological impacts of experiences of danger, violence, significant loss, or life-threatening events produce trauma.



This resource was developed in 2024 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21stCCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at [21stcclcntac.org](http://www.21stcclcntac.org). Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.