

STRESS PHYSIOLOGY

What is the skill?

The stress-response system helps children respond to danger and return to a calm state once the threat has passed.

What does normal development look like?

Children rely on caring adults to help regulate stress. With repeated co-regulation, their nervous system gradually learns to calm itself after challenges.

How does neglect interfere?

Neglect may keep the stress-response system activated for long periods. Over time, elevated stress hormones can influence brain development, physical health, emotional regulation, and learning.

What might this look like?

Children may appear constantly alert, easily startled, impulsive, emotionally reactive, or physically tense. Others may seem unusually withdrawn or shut down.

Parenting implications

Calm, predictable caregiving helps regulate the child's nervous system over time. Repeated experiences of safety gradually reduce chronic activation of the stress response.

From Understanding to Attunement

Many challenging behaviors begin with a nervous system that has learned to expect danger rather than safety.