WHAT HAPPENS WHEN BABIES AND TODDLERS FACE ADVERSE FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES:

A growing body of research on brain development connects adversity to toxic levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Unlike children with normal cortisol patterns that peak early in the day and decrease mildly until bedtime, children in families facing adversity have cortisol levels that are constantly elevated.

A CONSTANT HIGH LEVEL OF CORTISOL CAN HAVE DEVASTATING EFFECTS ON A CHILD'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT—including cycles of behavioral challenges that can lead to troubled adulthood. For example, a study at Stanford University showed that toxic levels of cortisol can shrink the size of the hippocampus, a brain structure important in memory processing and emotion regulation and linked elevated cortisol levels to depression, PTSD, anxiety, antisocial behavior, and increased alcohol abuse.

* POSITIVE: Brief increase in heart rate, mild elevation in stress hormone levels.

* TOLERABLE: Serious temporary stress response, buffered by supportive relationships.