It’s often argued that children today are growing up in a hypercompetitive world with new pressures not just to get good grades and stellar test scores but also to make the varsity basketball team, play in the school orchestra, and form a new school club on the side. This frequently rehearsed version of the “overstressed childhood” narrative is, however, very much a middle-class lament that fails to appreciate that there’s stress and then there’s stress. As tough as the middle-class gauntlet may be, the available evidence suggests that growing up in contemporary poverty-stricken families takes stress to yet higher levels, entailing frequent exposure to such stress-generating events as neighborhood violence, divorce and family chaos, health and mental health problems, residential and job mobility, and much more.

It’s not just that such poverty-induced stress is mentally taxing. If it’s experienced early enough in childhood, it can in fact get “under the skin” and change the way in which the body copes with the environment and the way in which the brain develops. These deep, enduring, and sometimes irreversible physiological changes are the very human price of running a high-poverty society.

The purpose of this issue is to lay out the facts and myths behind the developing science of early childhood and stress. Do poverty-stricken children indeed grow up in stress-ridden environments? Does such stress, if experienced early enough, bring about permanent physiological changes? Do these changes in turn lead to poor academic achievement and other competitive disadvantages? And, finally, can social policy play any part in changing such dynamics? The articles presented here answer all of the foregoing questions with a resounding “yes.”

We begin with a piece by Jack Shonkoff that describes how an overactivated stress-response system has toxic effects on brain architecture and the body’s other organs. In the following article, Gary Evans, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela Kato-Klebanov develop a comprehensive model of the life course of poverty-stricken children, a model in which the toxic stress described by Jack Shonkoff and others is one of the mediating variables accounting for poor academic outcomes. Lastly, Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson emphasize that, in light of this new science of early childhood development, we would do well to refashion income support in ways that better target the prenatal and early childhood environment.

It’s rare indeed that the science of poverty and achievement speaks so clearly on the matter of how best to spend our antipoverty dollars. Although Republicans and Democrats may differ on how much to spend on antipoverty initiatives, there are seemingly no politics at stake when it comes to spending our scarce antipoverty dollars wisely.

—David Grusky & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors