

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): An Overview

What Are ACEs?

When you encounter children and youth in the child welfare system, it's important to consider what adversities they have endured and how they may be impacted today. Research has shown that childhood hardships can potentially cause lasting physical and emotional harm.

These hardships can cause trauma. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states that trauma has three key components.

“Individual trauma results from an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as overwhelming or life-changing and that has profound **effects** on the individual’s psychological development or well-being, often involving a physiological, social, and/or spiritual impact” (SAMHSA 2014).

Based on a [study](#)ⁱ by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are 10 specific and possibly traumatizing events experienced by children and youth ages 0 to 17. These events range from experiencing or witnessing violence and abuse, experiencing neglect or dysfunction in the home due to parental loss, incarceration or a person suffering from mental illness within the home. The more adverse events in childhood, the more likely a child will have issues later in life. Please note that there are many other types of traumatic events that can impact a child and may not be labeled as an ACE. ACEs include, but are not limited to:

- Drug addicted or alcoholic family member
- Emotional abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Incarceration of any family member
- Loss of parent to death or abandonment, including abandonment by divorce
- Mentally ill, depressed or suicidal person in the home
- Physical abuse
- Physical neglect
- Sexual abuse
- Witnessing domestic violence against the parent

The Potentially Long Reach of ACEs

Although adverse events in childhood are quite common – and [only 36 percent of people have no ACEs](#)ⁱⁱ – they tend to go unrecognized or are hidden, especially physical and emotional neglect. ACEs have the potential to shape a child’s future and total well-being into adulthood.

Adverse events, along with the prolonged activation of the stress response system resulting in toxic stress, can also affect a child’s overall development – especially their brain development. The younger a child is when they experience an ACE, the greater their brain development is impacted. These effects can look like chronic physical and mental health issues, hypervigilance, lower impulse control, a greater vulnerability to addiction and poorer memory and learning abilities that can potentially affect the course of a child’s entire life, leaving them more vulnerable to poor life outcomes.

The Generational Impact of Trauma with ACEs

ACEs can also stem from historical or generational trauma, when one or more traumatic events – such as forced migration, systemic discrimination and genocide – impacts a collective community and is not healed in one generation.

This type of trauma passes from generation to generation and can cause negative effects such as increased suicide risk, domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health issues.

Research has shown that if a parent has an ACE score of four or higher, there's an increased chance their children will experience substance abuse, homelessness, neglect and exposure to intimate partner violence (Randall et. al 2015).

What You Can Do: Protective Factors and Building Resilience

Children and youth who experience ACEs can have a long and happy life. Positive life experiences, along with protective factors such as healthy coping mechanisms, good self-care practices and a reliable support system of family and friends, can counterbalance the effects of ACEs.

These protective factors can help a child or youth build their resilience (how well they can adapt in the face of adversity or crisis). Healthy caregiver relationships, connections with supportive friends and the community and other support services can promote resilience. Building these connections can also buffer the effects of re-traumatization that are common in the foster care system. The best way to ensure children and youth have bright futures is by preventing ACEs. The CDC provides [strategies on how to prevent ACEs](#)ⁱⁱⁱ by addressing the causes that put children and families at risk.

Resources

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[SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach | SAMHSA Publications. \(2014\). Retrieved from https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884.html](#)

ⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/cestudy/about.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/cestudy/about.html>

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