

## **Overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences Such as Trauma or Abuse**

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Research has continually found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as living with a caregiver who is struggling with substance abuse or mental health challenges and traumatic experiences like sexual abuse, are more common than expected, span the entire country and impact the adult's ability to recover, heal and thrive throughout adulthood. These findings continually impact us as caring adults, and as a nation—and should spur us to focus on how we can work together to reduce and prevent the opportunity for adverse experiences for children.

### **Background:**

In the late 1990's, researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with collaborators at Kaiser Permanente, conducted a study of over 17,000 adults in California to understand the relationship among adverse events in childhood and adult health and well-being (Felitti et al., 1998). The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study) has advanced how we think about trauma, adversity and its relationship to physical, emotional and mental health. Similar studies have been conducted across the United States and have supported the findings of the original ACE Study (Merrick, Ford, Ports, & Guinn, 2018).

### **Findings:**

**First**, these studies highlight that trauma and adversity are common. In the original study, researchers asked adults how many of the following events occurred before the age of 18 years: child physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, living with a caregiver who struggled with a mental health or substance abuse problem, exposure to intimate partner violence, having a member of the household absent (e.g., divorce), or having a caregiver who was incarcerated.

From there, researchers were able to calculate an ACE score for each respondent anywhere from 0 (none of the adversities listed before the age of 18 years) to 10 (experienced all 10 adversities before the age of 18 years). Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported at least one of these events before the age of 18 years (ACE score of 1). Subsequent research studies outside of California have found similar results, suggesting the common nature of trauma and adversity (Merrick et al., 2018). For example, researchers used Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data from across the United States and found that 62% percent of adults reported at least 1 ACE adversity before the age of 18 years.

**Second**, the original ACE study, and those that have followed, highlighted that many individuals experience multiple forms of trauma and adversity at the same time, what some have termed “poly-victimization” (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). For example, over 12% of those in the original ACE’s study in California experienced 4 or more adversities (an ACE score of 4 or more) before the age of 18 years. In the study by Merrick and colleagues (2018) using data from across the US, approximately 25% of people experienced 4 or more ACEs. *What is clear is that trauma and adversity often occur together and can happen to people across social, political and economic lines.* The compounding effect of multiple traumas or adversities can lead to what is termed “toxic stress” which can have significant effects on a child’s developing brain and physical body (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

**Third**, the more trauma and adversity that a person experienced, the worse they were able to cope physically, emotionally and mentally in adulthood. Compared to those with an ACE score of 0, those with a score of 4 or more were at increased risk for some of the leading causes of death in the United States, including heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes (Felitti et al., 1998). Further, increased ACE scores were associated with mental health challenges, substance abuse and challenges in the workplace. Those with an ACE score of 6 or more had a 20-year decreased life expectancy compared to those with an ACE score of 0 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

While it is clear that trauma and adversity are common amongst people, and that adverse childhood experiences can have long-reaching effects into adulthood, it is also important to note that one of the most promising findings of the research to date is that **PREVENTION IS POSSIBLE!** A recent study found that when we prevent ACEs we can prevent some of the leading causes of disease, disability and death in the country (Merrick et al., 2019). For example, by preventing ACEs before they can begin, we could prevent nearly 44% of all cases of depression; that equates to nearly 21 million cases of depression if we were to prevent ACE’s (Merrick et al., 2019).

Adults who have any number of ACEs can still overcome the adversity they experienced, and can lead full, meaningful lives. A recent study found that even for those with high numbers of ACEs, when they experienced positive experiences in childhood—especially positive relationships with adults—it often helped individuals overcome or manage the trauma they experienced (Bethell, Jones, Gombojav, Linkenbach, & Sege, 2019). As a caring adult, you can help develop a community that supports mental health, physical health and overall well-being, and help others who have experienced ACEs to thrive.

### **What can we do?**

There are a couple simple things that adults can do to promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments for all children.

1. Help create the conditions for thriving families by advocating for policies that strengthen economic factors for families (e.g., Earned-Income Tax Credit) or policies that provide parents with flexibility to care for their children (e.g., Paid Family Leave). That means, consider writing letters to your local policy makers asking them to prioritize children and families in their policy making process. Talk about the importance of early childhood in setting the foundation for later health and well-being.
2. Never underestimate the power of your caring relationship with children. One of the most important factors in the life of a child is having an adult who cares for them and treats them with respect—who will listen to them if they have an adverse experience to share. Volunteer, be a mentor, or otherwise get involved in the life of a child as a safe adult through healthy and appropriate interactions. Model the patience, kindness and many other qualities that we hope our children will expect from all adults in their lives, and that they will later exemplify in their own journeys to adulthood.

**For additional resources on the prevention of trauma and adversity, visit:**

- Prevent Child Abuse America: <https://preventchildabuse.org/>
- The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children: <https://www.apsac.org/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/ace/)

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