

When I was asked to be a panelist for the community conference on healing from ACES and give my vision as a pediatrician on how to create a trauma-informed and resilient Central Florida, I was both honored and nervous. To be perfectly honest, I didn't know about the science of toxic stress or the word, ACES until about 4 years ago. No, I didn't learn about it in medical school or in my pediatric residency at Johns Hopkins. But once I became aware of the connection between childhood trauma, the biological manifestations of toxic stress and overall health, it changed the way I saw my patients and how I managed them.

A large number of my patients are from Pine Hills, a community in Orlando, Florida known for poverty and crime. Some of the children experience constant adversity-family dysfunction, abuse, neglect, incarcerated parents, caregivers with mental illness or substance abuse and fear from living in an unsafe environment. Some manage to do very well. Yet others without strong buffers to love, nurture and protect them, don't fare well at all. They are the kids who are diagnosed with ADHD, learning disabled, bipolar and the list goes on and on. Although these are true medical diagnosis, I have learned to question, "Is this really ADHD or symptoms of toxic stress from high doses of ACEs?"

Dr. Robert Block, past President of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) said, "ACES are the single greatest unaddressed public health threat facing our nation today." My hope for Central Florida is to not only build a trauma informed community but a community equipped with healing practices and resilience building strategies to support and empower its present and future generations.

In order to tackle ACES, we must:

1. Look to our neighbors and national models to implement protocols that work.
2. Continue to raise awareness and educate the community about ACES.
3. Screen for ACEs to identify those at risk for toxic stress and poor health outcomes. The AAP recommends all children be screened for ACEs at well visits. Identify key sectors for additional screening. Encourage self-screening.
4. Develop a system of care for individuals with four or more ACEs. Implement collaboration and coordination across sectors to prevent further trauma, create buffers of support and start the healing process.
5. Partner with quality mental health providers who are certified in trauma specific therapies such as, EMDR, CPT, Prolonged exposure, seeking safety or TF-CBT.
6. Foster healing practices and resilience building strategies such as, parenting and early intervention programs; promotion of healthy lifestyle-optimal sleep,

nutrition and exercise; and mindfulness practices-deep breathing, meditation and yoga. These modalities have been shown to help prevent trauma, strengthen parent-child interactions and counteract the impact of toxic stress.

7. Form a centralized resource center or database easily accessible to everyone. Collect data to guide best practices and serve as a referral/tracking system.

Frederick Douglass said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Central Florida can no longer overlook ACEs because it gets under our skin and literally makes us sick. It gets into our DNA and passes on to the next generation. We must overcome ACEs for our children and our children’s children. Let’s get to work.

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