



Trauma-Informed Teaching

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Building Resilience for Teachers and Students



Understanding ACEs

Recent social and scientific research calls upon educators to provide students with not only academic learning, but also the social and emotional tools needed to be successful in life. We once thought subjects like math and history to be disconnected from basic social skills and emotional resilience. Now, however, science is showing that all these factors are inter-related.

A child cannot learn math and history when his basic needs aren't being met at home or when he is suffering from trauma.

A groundbreaking study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente found that childhood trauma, referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs, can have a lasting impact on the child's physical and mental health that can cost society for decades to come. These impacts include a wide range of health and social issues, including depression, addiction, obesity, and homelessness. When it comes to education, children who are exposed to four or more ACEs are [32 times more likely to have learning and behavioral problems](#). Mistreated children are also more likely than their peers to be held back a grade, have poor attendance, and be placed in special education classes. While this is devastating information, there is good news: These outcomes can be prevented with proper treatment and support.

Armed with this knowledge, teachers, after-care providers, and other caregivers can be better prepared to deal with negative behavior and improve outcomes for their neediest children.



Learn more at www.acesconnection.com/g/sonoma-county-aces-connection

The Impact of Trauma

The Study

The landmark ACEs study is changing the way communities—including Sonoma County—think about public health. The study examined the link between childhood trauma and adult health for more than 17,000 adult participants. It found that ACEs have lasting impacts on a person’s health and social well-being. Researchers also found that the greater the number of traumatic childhood experiences, the greater the risk for negative outcomes later in life.

Defining Trauma

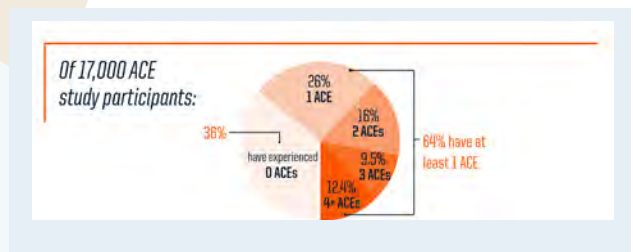
Trauma is an umbrella term used to describe the inability of an individual or a community to respond in a healthy way physically, emotionally, and mentally to acute or chronic stress.

—WA State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Neuroscience has shown that extreme or ongoing trauma can affect the way a child’s brain develops. Heightened, or toxic, amounts of stress hormones like cortisol cause the brain to adapt in ways that strengthen the fight or flight reflex. This helps a child survive abuse and neglect, but can lead to behavior that is problematic in a “normal” setting like school.

Trauma is Common

The study, conducted among San Diego Kaiser Permanente patients, found that ACEs are surprisingly common—even in affluent communities. Over 28 percent of participants reported experiencing physical abuse, 20 percent reported experiencing sexual abuse, and 27 percent reported household substance abuse. Overall, 64 percent reported at least one ACE.

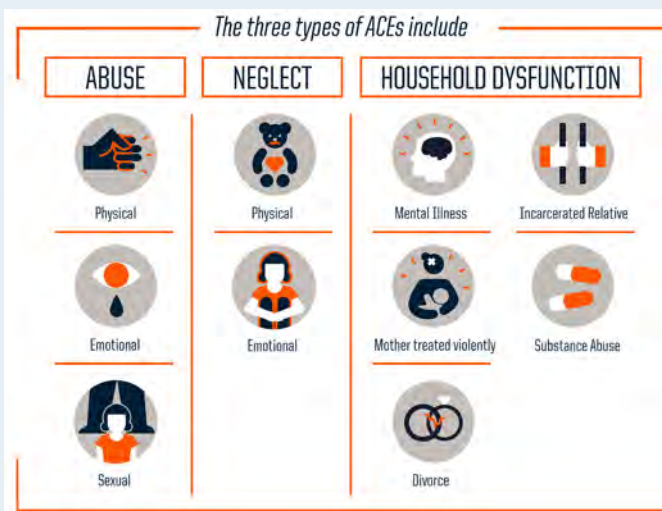


Trauma is Toxic

Repeated instances of trauma can have a toxic effect as damaging levels of stress hormones build up in the body, leading to a range of negative health impacts. These include smoking, alcoholism, missed work, obesity, diabetes, depression, suicide attempts, and many more.

Impact in the Classroom

A child who has suffered numerous ACEs might come into the classroom with elevated stress hormones, making her much more apt to act out. A simple stern word from a teacher could trigger a memory of a past trauma in a child and provoke defensive behavior. Most teachers have experienced these frustrating encounters but might not have fully understood what prompted them. ACEs can also impact a student’s ability to concentrate, work with others, regulate emotions, and much more. Once it is clear that a student is behaving in a certain way because of trauma, it is easier to react with empathy and find the student appropriate resources.



Images courtesy of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: rwjf.org/aces

Trauma in Sonoma County



More Common than You Might Think

According to a June 2016 report, the number of Sonoma County parents who report their children have had two or more adverse experiences is 18.8 percent. This is very close to the California rate of 18.2 percent.¹ Twenty-two (22) percent of the total adult population of Sonoma County has suffered four or more ACEs. This is higher than the state average of 16.7 percent.²

Nearly one in five Sonoma County children have had two or more adverse experiences.



"I think every teacher in the county has at least one child with an elevated ACE score," says Georgia Ioakimedes, director of Alternative Education programs at SCOE. Numerous public agencies in Sonoma County are now teaming up to address the high number of ACEs in the community.

1. Data Source: Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health, Advancing data-in-action partnerships for children and children with special health care needs in California counties and cities using synthetic estimation from the 2011/12 National Survey of Children's Health and 2008-2012 American Community Survey (Jun. 2016)

2. Source: Demographics of the 2010 California adult population compared to California Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

ACEs in Petaluma City Schools

Petaluma City Schools has turned its focus to training teachers and other school staff in ACEs as it seeks to help the roughly 20 percent of its student population that more general efforts have not reached. Dave Rose, assistant superintendent of student services, notes that graduation rates have improved dramatically in the last decade at the same time that suspensions and drop-out rates have plummeted, thanks to a range of efforts to ensure students stay in school and feel safe and cared for. However, progress has slowed in recent years, leading district staff to look to the data to see which students they were not reaching.

"I'm proud of what we've done; we know that the overall climate is good," Mr. Rose said. "But in the last few years, we've plateaued. We began asking, 'what's next?' We believe trauma-informed care is that thing." In addition to having Licensed Marriage-Family Therapists (LMFTs), MFT interns, and trainees for children with intensive needs, the district has begun training its staff in ACEs.

PCS Guidance Coordinator and LMFT Nikki Jackson says that many teachers welcome the information about ACEs. For them, it is an intuitive explanation of student behavioral issues. "It's what we've known for years, but now we have data to prove it," she says.

Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies

Understanding the Behavior



It can be helpful to understand that many “bad” behaviors are often caused by toxic stress and as a result are largely out of the child’s control, say Mr. Rose and Ms. Jackson. This doesn’t mean the behavior should go without consequences, they say. Indeed, appropriate and consistent consequences are important in helping children develop a sense of self-control. But this knowledge can help a frustrated teacher understand the root of a child’s behavior and take the actions less personally.

Students with Trauma Might Show:

- Hyperactivity
- Verbal aggression
- Opposition
- Limit testing
- Withdrawal
- Daydreaming
- Forgetfulness
- Shutting down

They Might Have Difficulty With:

- Organization
- Cause and effect
- Empathy
- Attentiveness
- Regulating emotions
- Engaging
- Transitions

A Team Approach



Petaluma City Schools is taking a team approach to its ACEs work. Teachers and district guidance specialists, as well as administrators, meet together to discuss students with intensive needs.

These meetings are places where staff can share notes about a student’s struggles or progress, vent as needed, and also problem solve. A team approach also helps take pressure off the teacher to act as a mental health professional, says Ms. Jackson.

The district also supports staff through professional development. In these trainings, educators learn about ACEs and warning signs for child trauma (e.g. lack of engagement, angry behavior, very dark writing). They receive advice on how to treat a child with ACEs (for instance, a warm and personal greeting as the child enters the classroom can immediately lower his stress and make him more ready to learn). In the end, it’s all about helping the individual child with his unique needs. “At PCS, it’s one child at a time,” says Mr. Rose.

A Change of Perspective

The question is changing from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”

—Holly White-Wolfe, Sonoma County Upstream Investments

“We talk about students having an emotional backpack and how heavy it is on any given day. You don’t have to excuse their behavior, but you can know where it’s coming from.”

—Georgia Ioakimedes, SCOE

Resilience for Students and Teachers

A number of local experts and trainings are available to help educators better understand ACEs. Pictured above are the Sonoma County ACEs & Resiliency Fellows. Read more about resources and training on page 7.



Teachers Can be Key to Student Resilience

Building resilience can counter the effects of trauma and help youths lead more effective, productive, and healthy adulthoods. Responsive care-giving, provided by trusted adults, can mitigate the effects of early stress and neglect. Brian Farragher, Executive Director of the Hanna Boys Center and a local leader in trauma-informed care, says educators in particular have a powerful responsibility and opportunity to be a consistent, stable adult in their students' lives.

"Kids who do really well despite extreme adversity generally are able to point to somebody in their life who believed in them," he adds. "The opportunity for teachers to be that person is amazing." He recommends becoming familiar with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Four Rs guidelines for a trauma-informed approach. Read about them at www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions.

Care for the Caregiver

Perhaps the most important part of helping students cope with trauma is taking care of oneself as a caregiver. Georgia Ioakimedes explains that teachers, nurses, counselors, school psychologists, and others who work closely with students can burn out or even develop what is known as secondary trauma. This can cause them to react negatively instead of being the calm, self-controlled person students need. She encourages teachers to learn to recognize the signs of secondary trauma and find some ways to cope.

Impact on the Caregiver

"Self care is important. If you're not filling your cup, you're going to get sucked dry. Then you're going to see kids as a problem rather than being magnificent."
—Brian Farragher, Hanna Boys Center

Seek Help or Consultation if You:

- Dream about students' trauma/ can't stop thinking about them
- Have trouble concentrating or sleeping
- Feel irritable
- Feel numb/detached

Find a Way to De-stress:

- Take a walk
- Eat well—be sure to take lunch
- Meditate
- Get lots of sleep and rest
- Find what works best for you and make a plan
- Drink lots of water

Mindfulness as a Path to Resilience



Ms. Kris Ackerman and her 7th-grade students get comfortable at desks, on cushions, and in Adirondack chairs for their 15-minute mindfulness break. While the usual hustle and bustle between periods preceded the meditation, the students grew very still and peaceful as they entered the class and prepared to calm their minds.

Trauma at Cook Middle School

Matthew Pollack, principal of Lawrence Cook Middle School in Santa Rosa, oversees a campus where many students have experienced trauma. He estimates that more than 60 percent of his student body has four or more ACEs. Additionally, the campus has dealt with the trauma of the shooting death in 2013 of former student Andy Lopez. Since that tragic event, the school has taken numerous steps to build a positive school climate and address student trauma. In 2016-17, it rolled out a new measure that Pollack says is making a notable difference already: Mindfulness. Mindfulness and meditation are ways to calm the mind and focus. "Many of our kids have lives that are kind of chaotic—there's lots of hustle-bustle, lots of drama," he says. "We want them to let go of those feelings when they get to school so they can get on with their education and ready themselves for high school."

A Calming Start to the Day

What does mindfulness look like in a school setting? At Cook, it looks like this: At the start of the day at 8:00am and again at 1:40pm, the campus basically shuts down for 15 minutes. In each room, teachers hit a chime, dim lights, and ask students to sit with their backs straight, arms and hands relaxed, and breathe in a specific, patterned, and calming way. Then they guide the students through calming and positive thoughts about themselves and their day.

Overcoming Skepticism—Seeing Results

Pollack admits there was a bit of skepticism from students at first, particularly among the eighth graders. While some skepticism remains, overall the efforts have led to a much calmer campus and more focused classes, he says. Indeed, the campus has seen a reduction in referrals of over 30 percent this year as compared to last year. The number of suspensions at this point in the school year are in the mid-60s, compared with about 100 at this point last year. And for the first quarter of the school year, the number of kids making a 3.0 grade or higher rose by 10 percent. "There were students who were involved in a whole lot of trouble last year who are not in trouble this year," he says. "We want to create a mindset for our students that school is the best, most peaceful and positive place to be. The adults here care about you, your well-being, and your future."

While Cook has been fortunate to have Dr. Maria Hess, of Sonoma State University and Humanidad Therapy and Education Services, work with the school's staff the past few years to study the school climate and build capacity to roll out the mindfulness effort, Pollack realizes not every school has this kind of resource. He encourages any school wishing to try mindfulness to begin with a team of just four or five teachers and grow the initiative from there. Those teachers can become leaders in helping the rest of the campus adopt the initiative.

Resources and Trainings

Sonoma County ACEs Connection



This consortium of organizations ranging from child welfare to schools to immigration focuses on bringing the community together to prevent, heal, and treat ACEs while promoting resiliency. Collaborators include Hanna Boys Center, Child Parent Institute, Upstream Investments Initiative, SCOE, and Sonoma County Health Services. [Learn more.](#)

ACEs & Resiliency Fellows



This new and unique county initiative is building a group of local experts on ACEs and resilience science who can in turn train schools or community groups wishing to implement trauma-informed care. [Learn more.](#)

SCOE-Sponsored Trainings



SCOE's Alternative Education department is partnering with the Hanna Boys Center to offer a training series on ACEs. Trainings include not only how to work with students with high ACE scores but also focus on care for the caregiver. Trainings are open to teachers/district staff, mental/behavioral health staff, and others who work with adolescents. Register [online.](#)

Paper Tigers



[This acclaimed documentary](#) follows a year in the life of an alternative high school that has radically changed its approach to disciplining /working with its students. It shows a promising model for how to break cycles of poverty, violence, and disease that affect families.

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