

CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY: 101

FACTS FOR POLICYMAKING

KNOW THE FACTS

Over the last 20 years, research has transformed our understanding of how toxic stress resulting from childhood adversity is at the root of many chronic physical, mental, and behavioral health problems, and has a major impact on the economic and social health of communities.

In 1998, the groundbreaking Centers for Disease Control & Prevention - Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study) measured 10 types of childhood adversity that included abuse, neglect, witnessing violence against one's parent, parental mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration and separation from a primary caregiver. The ACE study found that:

- ACEs are surprisingly common (most of us have experienced at least one);
- ACEs are strongly associated with chronic diseases, depression, unplanned pregnancies, prescription drug abuse, broken bones, obesity, mental illnesses, and violence;
- The higher the ACE score, the greater the likelihood of negative outcomes:
 - In comparison to an ACE score of 0, an ACE score of 4 increases the risk of alcoholism seven times and attempted suicide 12 times; it also doubles the risk of heart disease and cancer.
 - Without positive intervention, those with six or more ACEs have shorter lifespans by up to 20 years.
- Any four ACEs cause as much damage as any other. In other words, if we want to eradicate obesity, addiction, smoking, and violence, we must address all types of childhood adversity.

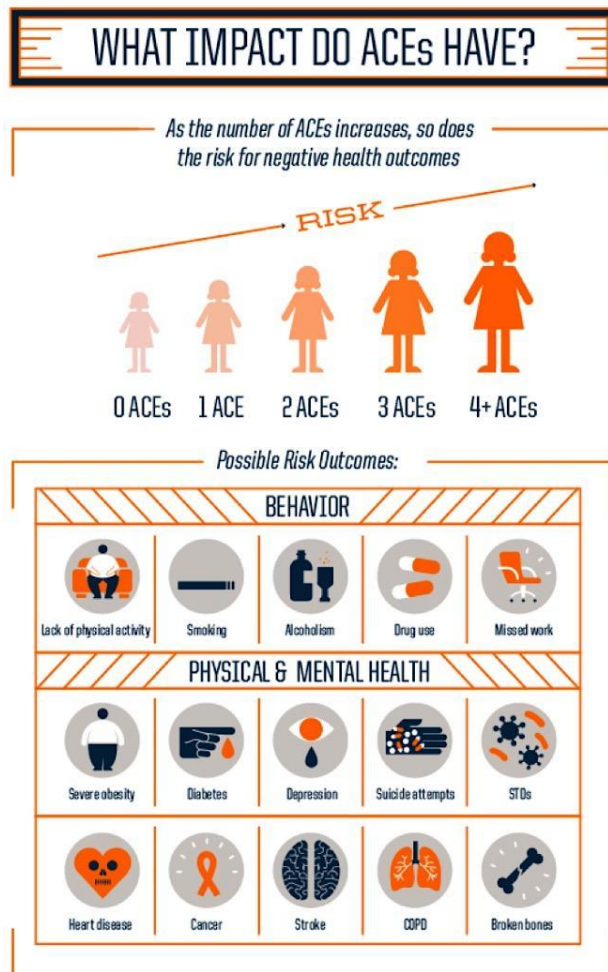


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Other forms of adversity, such as experiencing racism, bullying, witnessing a sibling being abused, or witnessing violence outside the home have also been linked to negative social, emotional, and health outcomes. When ACEs are experienced in conjunction with community-level stressors, such as poverty, this may lead to increases in individual vulnerability to negative outcomes.

Though not all stress is bad for the body, toxic stress—the physiological result of exposure to high doses of adversity without the buffering presence of at least one supportive adult—can have lasting effects on an individual’s life. This is because toxic stress:

- Interferes with healthy brain development and can lead children to experience learning difficulties, as well as to adopt maladaptive coping mechanisms such as becoming violent, overeating, or abusing alcohol or other drugs;
- Alters the body’s endocrine and immune systems, increasing the risk for cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and various autoimmune diseases;
- Alters how genes are read and transcribed, which can be passed from generation to generation.

COUNTER CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY

Many organizations, community advocates, and policymakers are interested in taking action on this issue, but struggling to determine what’s the best way to address childhood adversity. Increasing awareness about the impacts of childhood adversity, building systems and practices to identify and provide prompt interventions and promoting a trauma-informed workforce are important actions towards mitigating and/or preventing the negative consequences of childhood adversity.

Public policy has an important role to play. Trauma-informed bills recognize the widespread impact of trauma on individuals and communities by ensuring that the proposed policy strengthens community supports for children and families to prevent trauma in the first place, making paths for recovery and healing more accessible.

Take steps to prevent and appropriately respond to childhood adversity and build protective factors and resilience:

Raise public awareness about the impact of childhood adversity, by:

- ◆ Incorporating the science of adverse childhood experiences and trauma into bills and programs;
- ◆ Creating policies that foster environments that allow parents and caregivers to be successful as supportive adults for children;

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- ◆ Supporting training for presenters who can disseminate knowledge on ACEs science to local government and community organizations

Cultivate trauma-informed systems, by:

- ◆ Incentivizing child- and family- serving systems and organizations to integrate trauma-informed approaches into organizational policy and practice;
- ◆ Instituting policies and programs that aim to address the broader determinants of childhood adversity, particularly for communities that experience childhood adversity more severely and profoundly, such as communities with large numbers of undocumented immigrants or communities that suffer a high rate of violence.

Enhance early identification and prompt intervention, by:

- ◆ Incentivizing healthcare providers to adopt mechanisms for early identification
- ◆ Improving access to effective and promising treatments and practices that address childhood adversity, especially for communities that experience childhood adversity more severely and profoundly;
- ◆ Allocating funding to continue research on best practices.

Support the development of a trauma-informed workforce, by:

- ◆ Making professional licensure and certification standards inclusive of trauma-informed approaches and promoting education on the negative effects of childhood adversity, as well as how to build protective factors and resilience;
- ◆ Creating incentives to recruit diverse service providers, particularly from communities that experience childhood adversity more severely and profoundly, and require training on childhood adversity and trauma-informed approaches

To learn more about our work or for more information on childhood adversity, visit www.4CAkids.org. To explore how you might bring the 4CA campaign to your community, email us at 4CAkids@centerforyouthwellness.org.