

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

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PROBLEM

What is it? Why is it being talked about?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic experiences that youth are exposed to when they are under the age of 18. These traumatic experiences can be related to abuse, neglect, or household challenges. ACEs can have an impact on negative mental and physical health outcomes throughout adulthood.⁽¹⁻³⁾

The two most reported ACEs are economic hardship and parental separation or divorce,⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾ issues that are faced by many Texas children.

The relationship between ACEs and food insecurity is multi-faceted.⁽⁹⁻¹²⁾ A parent's mental health status, something that is categorized as an ACE, can subsequently impact their ability to provide adequate food for their child(ren). An accumulation of multiple ACEs is associated with higher odds of experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity itself is associated with toxic stress – the stress that is caused by other ACEs.^(13, 14)

Types of ACEs^(4, 5)



Abuse

- Physical Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Sexual Abuse



Neglect

- Physical Neglect
- Emotional Neglect



Household Challenges

- Incarcerated household member
- Parental separation or divorce
- Mental illness in household
- Household substance misuse
- Domestic Violence



Other Adversity

- Bullying
- Poverty
- Community Violence
- Natural disasters

DATA

How big is the problem?

The high prevalence of ACEs has been well documented, with up to 45% of children in the US experiencing at least 1 ACE.^(6, 8, 15)

In Texas, over 19% of children have experienced two or more ACEs before their 18th birthday.⁽¹⁶⁾



ACEs cause repeated activation of a child's stress response, and with minimal stable environments from trusted caregivers, a high ACE score can have consequences lasting well beyond childhood. This can include changes in brain development, immune responses, metabolic responses and how DNA is read and transcribed within the body.^(3, 15, 17, 18)

As a result, adverse childhood experiences are associated with health conditions including mental and behavioral health issues, decreased life expectancy, increased risk of viral infections, increased risk of asthma, increased risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and increased risk of substance misuse in both children and adults affected by ACEs.

People who experience 4 or more ACEs are:⁽³⁾

38X
more likely to die by suicide

11X
more likely to have Alzheimer's disease or Dementia

2X
more likely to have cancer, heart disease, or stroke

ACEs-related illnesses are costly to families and communities. Economic losses due to ACEs can be in the form of healthcare spending or lost wages from missed days of work, among others.⁽¹⁹⁾ A 10% reduction in ACEs would save approximately \$56 billion annually in the United States.⁽¹⁵⁾

SOLUTIONS



Screening for ACEs

ACEs screenings completed by healthcare providers provide the opportunity to identify adversities and ACEs and can capitalize on critical opportunities for prevention and intervention, such as making referrals to family support programs.^(6, 21) Additionally, ACEs screening can strengthen patient-provider relationships through increased trust and empathy.⁽²⁰⁾

In communities where pediatric clinics are difficult to travel to, ACEs and other trauma screenings have been implemented in school-based health centers, underscoring the importance of providing trauma-informed training to clinicians and educators.^(20, 22)

Raising Awareness of ACEs

Raising awareness of ACEs can reduce the prevalence of ACEs and their negative effects.

This includes:

- Providing trauma-informed education for teachers, health care providers, and community members.
 - Trauma-informed education and healthcare assume that an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma (including ACEs),^(23, 24) acknowledge the role that trauma may play in a person's behavior, physical health, and life, and seek to avoid re-traumatizing them.^(25, 26)
- Training leaders of youth groups – such as faith-based groups, Boy & Girl Scouts, sports teams, and recreational organizations – on how to notice signs of ACEs among kids in their community so they too can avoid re-traumatizing youth under their care.
- Promoting public education campaigns about ACEs.

Protective Factors⁽²⁷⁾**Household-level**

- Enable caregivers to meet household basic needs of food, shelter, health services for children
- Strengthen families' nutritional resilience through SNAP, WIC, and school meal programs
- Expand access to necessary healthcare and mental health services through CHIP and Medicaid
- Equip pediatric clinic and child psychiatry staff with resources for families/caregivers to work through conflicts peacefully and build positive relationships with the people around them

Community Level

- Reinforce training of teachers and childcare, after-school, and extracurricular staff to create safe and engaging environments by responding appropriately to conflicts or behavioral issues and modeling positive coping and problem-solving
- Support public education campaigns that encourage individuals to stay involved in their communities
- Prepare for the successful implementation of referral programs by creating streamlined communication systems

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