

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Child trauma occurs when children are exposed to events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope with what they have experienced (<http://www.nctsnet.org/content/defining-trauma-and-child-traumatic-stress>). A traumatic experience may be a single event, a series of events, or a chronic condition. The experience of trauma is highly individualized.

The Impact of Trauma

A traumatic event is not an isolated event perceived equally by those who experience it. In other words, what is traumatic to one child may not necessarily have the same impact on another child. Similarly, what adults may perceive as traumatic may be very different from what a child perceives as traumatic. For example, a parent may believe a hurricane that destroyed their home is most traumatic, however, a young child in the same family may be most upset by losing his cat who ran away during the storm. For this reason it is critical to attempt to understand the unique meaning of children's experiences.

Factors That Influence the Impact of Trauma

History of previous trauma: An individual with a previous traumatic experience may be more likely to feel traumatized or even develop mental health problems when faced with another similar negative experience. Additionally, individuals other types of traumas- such as victims of violence or abuse- are also more likely to develop mental health problems when faced with negative experiences.

History of mental health problems: Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse may become worse after a traumatic experience.

Aftereffects and proximity to the experience: Individuals with significant loss (i.e. a family member's death, injury to self or others) as a result of the accident are more likely to have emotional or social problems after a traumatic experience. Individuals who had a near death experience as a result of the



accident are also more likely to develop mental health problems.

Individuals who witnessed an event are more likely to develop problems than those who simply heard about the event.

Family mental health problems: Individuals who had family members with mental health problems are more likely to develop mental health problems resulting from the traumatic events than individuals with family members without mental health problems.

Responses to Trauma

Emotional response: Emotions such as: extreme fear, guilt, helplessness, and shame negatively impact an individual's ability to recover from a potentially traumatic experience.

Dissociation: A person experiences the feeling of being not being part of the traumatic event (i.e. feels cut off from his body and his surroundings; feels numb to physical and emotional feelings; feels as if he is floating outside his body; and/or has no memories of the event).

Temperament: Individuals who are "happy go lucky" or generally optimistic may be less likely to develop problems than individuals who often negative or frequently perceive themselves as victims in life.

Support Systems: Family, caregivers, friends, culture, and environment all have a great influence on how an individual experiences a traumatic event. Adults can help children from becoming overwhelmed by even very adverse or dangerous experiences. The help of adults is also critical when children have become overwhelmed and experienced trauma.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, Study is one of the largest investigations of the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on later life health and well-being.

The original ACEs Study was conducted at Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with two waves of data collection. Over 17,000 people receiving physical exams completed confidential surveys regarding their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors.

Researchers studied the relationship between these 10 adverse childhood experiences:

- Child physical abuse
- Child sexual abuse
- Child emotional abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect
- Mentally ill, depressed or suicidal person in the home
- Drug addicted or alcoholic family member
- Witnessing domestic violence against the mother

- Loss of a parent to death or abandonment by parental divorce
- Incarceration of any family member for a crime

Researchers found that these experiences had a profound impact on health outcomes later in life. The ACEs study revealed that stress is a biological mechanism. Traumatic experiences do not simply happen to children, they happen inside their brains and bodies. Stress causes the body to release cortisol. Prolonged exposure to dangerously high levels of cortisol- known as toxic stress- impacts the brain's capacity and ability to learn. Thus, students who are victims of trauma are at increased risk for academic failure and often under-perform or struggle in the classroom.

The CDC continues to collect data on ACEs and health outcomes. Some research has started to expand the definition of ACEs to include the impact of racism, oppression, and community violence. Researchers are finding similar correlations between these adverse experiences and long-term health outcomes.

- Racism
- Poverty
- Systemic Oppression
- Exposure to Community Violence
- Microaggressions
- Stereotype Threat
- Overly Punitive School Discipline
- Microaggressions
- Stereotype Threat
- Overly Punitive School Discipline

CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE 4 OR MORE ACEs:

10-12x
greater risk for
**INTRAVENOUS
DRUG USE and
ATTEMPTED SUICIDE**

2-3x
greater risk for
developing **HEART
DISEASE and
CANCER**

32x
More likely to have
**LEARNING and
BEHAVIORAL
PROBLEMS**

8 out of 10

LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH in the U.S.
Correlate with exposure to 4 or more ACEs