

Adverse Childhood Experiences

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What are ACES?

ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) look at the exposures of adversity or trauma in a child's life and the long term affects the trauma has on child's life. Childhood trauma may come in many forms whether it be from physical and mental abuse to neglect and household dysfunction. We have learned from ongoing research that there are measurable differences that occur in a child's brain when exposed to trauma and toxic stress over time. When a child has a high ACE score, there is a much greater likelihood for ongoing medical, mental health, and social problems as an adult.

Children and Trauma

As mentioned, when a child is constantly exposed to stress or trauma, there is evidence that the structures of the brain change during those early developmental years. One area of the brain is the amygdala - this is the part of the brain responsible for emotions, survival instincts, and memory. The amygdala of a traumatized child becomes enlarged because it is continuously overexcited or overworked and, as a result, makes it more likely for children to react to emotional triggers. MRIs have also shown that the hippocampus shrinks from the overactive amygdala. The shrinking hippocampus impacts attention, learning, and memory.

This particular information is a game changer for educators! When a child comes to us with previous or ongoing trauma, we are aware that students may have more difficulty self-regulating emotions, behavior, paying attention, learning and remembering information - all things essential for a successful day at school!

The quality of a child's experiences in the first few years of life (positive or negative) helps shape how their brain develops.



American Academy of Pediatrics & Center for Disease Control

The CDC has stated that toxic stress is the largest public health issue of this generation. Toxic stress is defined as an "excessive or prolonged activation of the stress response systems in the body and brain." Recently, the AAP issued a policy brief to all pediatricians addressing toxic stress - advising pediatricians to intergate ACES screening into their practice.

Developmental Consequences of Trauma and Toxic Stress

Childhood trauma is considered a pivotal casual factor in the development of psychopathology and the quality of relationships with parents and other caregivers. Even in a non-threatening environment, children will exhibit survival behaviors to deal with their uncomfortableness and anxiety.

Some other developmental consequences of trauma also include: difficulty trusting others, social isolation, hypersensitivity to physical contact, increased medical issues, poor affect regulation problems with academic achievement oppositional/antisocial behaviors and difficulty planning for the future.



1 Protective Factor

The single most effective protective factor to overcoming adversity is having a meaningful relationship with a caring adult.

Building Resiliency

Resilience is the ability to return to being healthy after traumatic things happen. In order to build a child's resilience to those adverse experiences we have to shift our lens from asking "What is wrong with this child?" to "What has this child been through?" When we do this, parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children identify feelings and manage emotions. It is important to create safe physical and emotional environments at home, school, and in our neighborhoods .

This year, we are excited to begin the KH Families initiative at Kissel Hill. The idea of "school families" came from Brownstown Elementary in the Conestoga Valley School District. The main idea behind "school families" is to provide students with an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with another caring adult at school. Students are also given a chance to help lead and care for their "school siblings" by forming peer relationships across grade levels. This time spent together will help grow students social and emotional health, as well as, add to our overall school culture and climate.

Resources

www.joiningforcesforchildren.org

www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/