

ACEs are common. Understanding a child's lived experiences can help reframe how you react to their behavior.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Toxic Stress

Potential adverse childhood experiences, including insecure households and unstable relationships, can have long-lasting effects on children/youth that continue into adulthood. Supporting community engagement helps children reach their fullest potential. Building strong neighborhoods and communities creates greater opportunities for all children/youth to thrive.

What is ACE?

The acronym ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences. This study, conducted by the CDC and the Kaiser Permanente healthcare organization, includes questions about possible adversities experienced by youth from infancy through age 17. There is a strong correlation between the number of ACEs experienced and an increased risk of poor mental and physical health, educational and occupational challenges, and changes in brain development that affect attention, decision-making, and stress responses.

Stress Compared to Toxic Stress

Experiencing stress is a normal part of life. However, when stress becomes intense, happens over a long time, and occurs in an environment lacking safety or support, it can trigger a toxic stress response. Unlike typical stress, toxic stress overwhelms the body's ability to cope and can lead to long-term physical, emotional, and psychological harm—especially in children.

Protective factors, like
**family strengths &
resilience**

help mitigate the
impact of trauma on
development.



Increased Risk in Adulthood When Experiencing Childhood Adversity

Research shows that experiences in childhood can have a lasting impact on health and well-being throughout life. ACEs are linked to an increased risk of many chronic health conditions, including cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. They can also contribute to mental health challenges, substance use, and a higher risk of suicide.

The **ACE Questionnaire** includes 10 categories of experiences that may occur *before the age of 18*, such as:

- Losing a parent through divorce, abandonment, death, or other reasons
- Living with someone who was depressed, mentally ill, or who attempted suicide
- Living with someone who had a problem with drinking or drug use
- Living with someone who went to prison
- Experiencing violence in the home
- Experiencing emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse or neglect

"This ACE score that you have is not an inevitability."

Dr. Bruce Perry

Understanding and Reframing

It's important to recognize that a child's past experiences can strongly influence how they react to situations. Instead of asking, *"What's wrong with you?"* consider reframing the question to, *"What happened to you?"* or *"Why might you be feeling or acting this way?"* This shift helps foster understanding and compassion rather than judgment.

It's also helpful to know that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are more common than many people realize:

- In a survey across 25 states, about **61% of adults** reported experiencing at least one type of ACE.
- Nearly **1 in 6 adults** reported experiencing **four or more** types of ACEs.

Approaches

How can I help my child/youth who has experienced adversity?

Building and Promoting Resilience

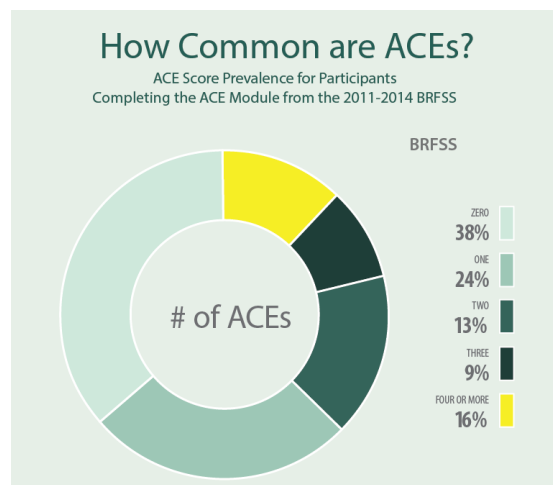
Resilience helps children/youth cope with and recover from adversity. One way to understand resilience is by imagining a balance scale: positive experiences and healthy coping skills can help counterbalance the effects of childhood adversity.

Seven Core Strategies to Strengthen Resilience in Children:

1. Help children recognize and understand their strengths and abilities.
2. Support them in building confidence and believing in their own capabilities.
3. Connect them to strong, supportive relationships within the community.
4. Teach core values, such as understanding right from wrong.
5. Encourage them to contribute to their community and support the well-being of others.
6. Help them discover healthy coping strategies that fit their unique needs.
7. Teach decision-making skills to give them a sense of control and independence in their lives.

How Common are ACEs?

ACE Score Prevalence for Participants
Completing the ACE Module from the 2011-2014 BRFSS



Protective Factors

Individual and Family

- Children/youth developing and maintaining positive relationships
- Actively engaging in educational and social activities
- Having a caring adult outside the family as an additional source of support and mentorship
- Supporting children/youth based on their developmental stage, not just their age
- Encouraging parental engagement, supervision, and consistent rule-setting at home
- Modeling healthy conflict resolution to help children/youth navigate everyday challenges

Community

- Access to medical care and mental health services for families
- Availability of safe and stable housing, along with reliable food security
- Access to economic resources and financial support for families

Create Awareness and Educating Families, Communities, and Policymakers

- Reduce the stigma around seeking help and support (e.g., for substance misuse, mental health, and parenting challenges)
- Promote community-based solutions rather than placing the burden solely on individuals
- Advocate for stable, nurturing relationships and supportive social environments

***"Connectedness
counterbalances adversity."
Dr. Bruce Perry***

Strategies and Approaches of Prevention

Secure A Strong Start

- Active engagement from families and early childhood education programs
- Access to enriched developmental opportunities

Teach Skills and Coping Mechanisms

- Promote social-emotional learning and positive behavior development
- Support the formation of healthy, stable relationships

Promote Protection Against Violence and Adversity

- Provide public education focused on building restorative relationship skills
- Advocate for legislative reforms that support economic stability and community well-being
- Encourage bystander intervention and the development of supportive allies





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Resources

Trauma Research Foundation: Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.
<https://traumaresearchfoundation.org/programs/faculty/bruce-perry/>

Help Children Manage Traumatic Events:
<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children-and-teens/tips-parents-and-caregivers/help-your-child-manage-traumatic->

Information and Tips on Trauma and Mental Health for Professionals who serve Children:
<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/task-force/child-trauma>

Trainings and Tools

Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire for Adults:
<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ACE-Questionnaire-for-Adults-Identified-English-rev.7.26.22.pdf>

Online trainings to learn and prevent ACE's:
<https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/aces-training/#/#top>

How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime, follow the link for a Ted Talk by Nadine Burke Harris, A Pediatrician with focus on Trauma:
https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime?language=en#t-37070

Services

National Alliance on Mental Illness includes:

- Guidebook on treatment strategies and state support programs
- Vermont Mental Health Providers and Designated Agencies

<https://namivt.org/nami-resources/>

University of Vermont Medical Center offers mental health services providing treatment for:

- Trauma and Stress-related Disorders
- Depression, Mood, and Anxiety Disorders

Psychological Services and how to access services:
<https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontpsych>

Department of Mental Health provides resources and services for:

- Child Trauma
- Information of how to be Trauma-informed
- Child Trauma Services in Vermont and developed Policy

Upcoming Events with community discussion:
<https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/services/children-youth-and-family/child-trauma>

Vermont Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health includes:

- Local Support Lines
- Events
- Trainings and Resources

<https://www.vffcmh.org/>

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