



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

In the late 1990's, a landmark study was conducted to examine the long-term effects of toxic stress – what the researchers called “**adverse childhood experiences**” or **ace** – including family dysfunction, poverty, domestic violence, abuse, and neglect. The control group was comprised of 17,000 adults, mainly white, well-educated, middle class people.

They found there was a **powerful connection between the level of stresses a person had faced as a youth and myriad social, physical, and emotional health problems. The more “aces,” the higher and greater the damage.**

Note: “toxic stress” is quite different than:

- **positive stress**, such as the first day of school or a childhood vaccine – which mildly and briefly increases the heart rate, and
- **tolerable stress**, like the loss of a loved one or personal injury – when the body's alert systems are more active, but the stress is short-lived and the child can adapt

Toxic stress occurs when a child experiences frequent, strong, and/or continuous stress, such as emotional or physical abuse, mental illness in a parent or caregiver, poverty, alcoholism in the home – and has no adult support to cope or buffer.

Not only does the child experience high and sustained levels of stress hormones – cortisol, adrenaline – **which can damage the brain and lead to difficulty learning, memory, or responding to stress**, but...

This significantly changes the architecture of the brain – including the development of a **smaller brain and damage to the hippocampus** (part of the brain involved in emotion, memory, the senses, and organizing), and fewer neurologic connections. It also affects **development of vital organs and organ systems, and it damages hormonal systems**, causing poor development, weakened immune systems in addition to cognitive and behavioral problems.

Research also proves that **maternal stress during pregnancy** and poor maternal care during infancy alter the genes involved in brain development. For mothers who have experienced or are experiencing toxic stress themselves, they have no model for understanding their children's behavior, so their response exacerbates the problem.

What do the effects of this “trauma” look like? For youth, it's typically one or more of the following symptoms:

- physical complaints – stomachache, headache
- constant worry about danger, or about the safety of loved ones
- signs of depression – withdrawal, lack of enjoyment in favorite activities
- difficulty paying attention, concentrating, or learning
- outbursts of anger – toward others or toward themselves
- refusal to follow rules
- use of violence to get their way
- bullying or aggression toward others
- rebellion
- risky behaviors – driving dangerously, dangerous “tricks”
- seeking revenge



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- lashing out
- abrupt changes in relationships – friends
- belief in stereotypes – males are aggressors, females are victims

What can be done about toxic stress?

First: work to understand -

- child/person is responding to trauma – in a “hyper-alarmed” state – true PTSD
- brain is in “survival” state – feeling unsafe, threatened, loss of control – can be triggered by many things (smells, noises, eye contact)
- child/adult is overwhelmed
- feels unsafe
- feels abandoned
- acting out – shouting, tantrums, throwing or hitting objects

Here is what the child or adult needs -

- to be treated respectfully
- not to be criticized
- firm and kind adults that help them feel safe, confident, competent –
- structure, consistency, routine
- help them feel “in control” again
- to know that adults will take care of them

How to help with “emotional regulation” -

- help the child feel safe and stable
- don't downplay their feelings
- don't make commitments you cannot honor
- remain calm – stay out of their “chaos”
- check in with them periodically – “doing okay?” – help them know someone cares
- help them think of positive ways to keep busy – share options, suggest steps
- teach replacement skills – when they recognize they are losing control, send them on an errand or give them a project

Other activities that help calm:

- physical movement – running errands for adult
- walking to the drinking fountain
- warm verbals – calm voice, let know you appreciate them, say “thank you,” apologize
- positive touch – touch on the shoulder, fist pump, high five

Early and positive relationships with adults can buffer the damaging effects of adverse childhood experiences.

As adults, we have a responsibility to understand and help.

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