

Developmental Trauma

Developmental trauma results from exposure to early ongoing or repetitive trauma (as infants, children, and youth) involving neglect, abandonment, physical abuse or assault, sexual abuse or assault, emotional abuse, witnessing violence or death, and/or coercion or betrayal. This often occurs within the child's caregiving system and interferes with healthy attachment and development.

Modern neuroscience helps us understand that human life has no precise beginning or end, with both genetic changes and actual cells persisting through generations. Adverse events in life, begin even before conception, during in utero development, and into childhood can have negative consequences on physical and mental health that last into adulthood.

Early adverse childhood experiences can have lifelong effects on adult mental and physical health with delayed consequences on gene expression, the immune system, and stress responses. Understanding childhood trauma as a developmental factor has changed the fundamental question from "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"

Adverse Childhood Experiences ('ACEs') is the largest longitudinal study ever conducted including over 18,000 participants over sixty years. This American study found that childhood experiences that result in trauma that goes untreated have a cascade effect over a lifetime impacting brain development, causing social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, adoption of health-risk behaviour and leading to disease, disability, and social problems that can culminate in early death.



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES – ACES

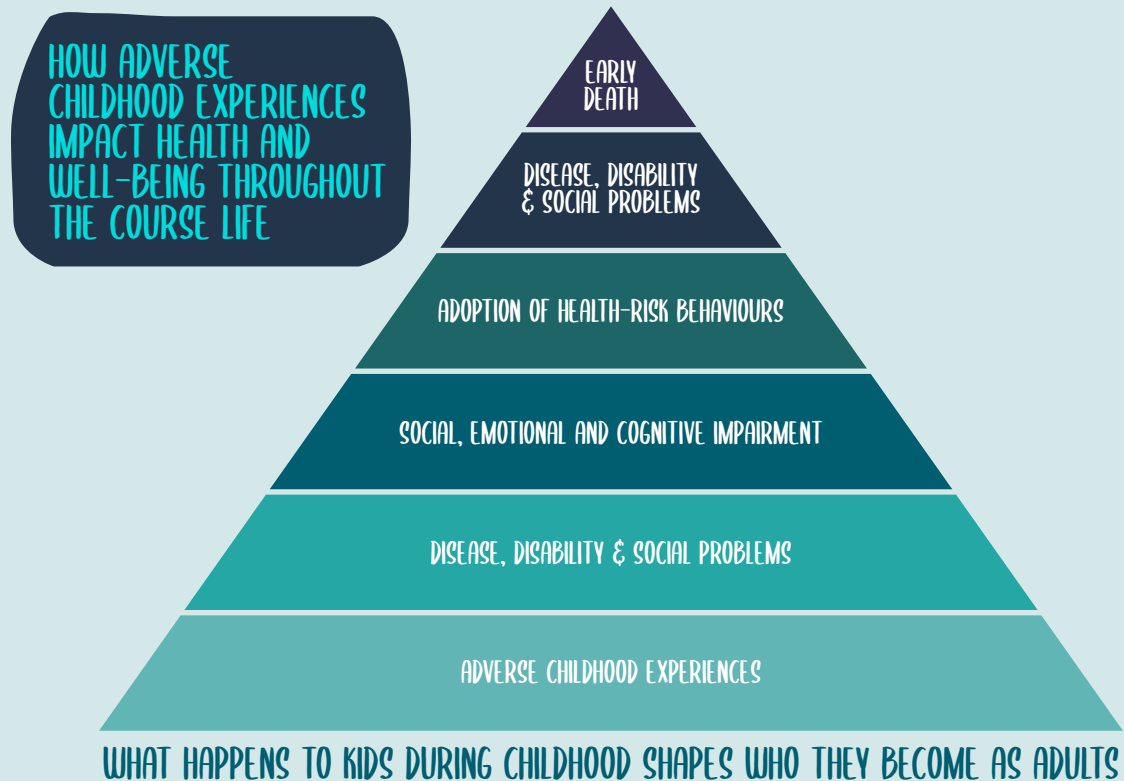


Figure 1 - Adverse Childhood Experiences - ACEs

ACEs childhood experiences include:

- **Abuse:** physical, sexual, and emotional
- Household dysfunction that includes substance abuse by a family member, the mother is treated violently, incarcerated family member, parents divorced or separated, and a family member with mental illness
- **Neglect:** emotional and physical

Protective Factors

It is important to note that adverse childhood experiences are not an automatic life sentence of dysfunction and decline. People are resilient. Trauma impacts can be mitigated. Healing is possible. Research has shown that children involved with child welfare who have just one supportive adult in their lives are more able to overcome significant life hurdles. Support can be life-changing.

The Social Ecology of Resilience

With support, resilience can be built up to mitigate the long-term consequences of trauma through increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. Resilience in children can be defined as the process by which the child moves through a traumatic event, using various protective factors for support, and returning to baseline. Resilience can be considered a trait, outcome, or process. When seen only as a trait, a comment that a person is “not resilient enough” becomes a judgment that doesn’t take into account how resilience actually happens. As a process, resilience includes both internal and external factors that can help a child redirect a negative experience or series of events into an outcome of personal development.

Protective factors at the family level, including caregiving and supportive relationships, are vital to developing resilience. Specific factors include family cohesion, extended family support, parental involvement, and positive parenting practices. Parental resilience, parental knowledge of child development along with social and emotional competence are all important protective factors for children.

At the community level, social connections and peer relationships are potential protective factors. Parents dealing with their own trauma need support and treatment with resources that allow them to access the help. There is evidence for mind-body methods that promote healing including mindfulness-based practices including meditation, yoga, and deep breathing. Community level protective factors support families with policies, programs, and resources.

At the societal level, formal recognition of children’s rights, legal protections to prevent and combat family violence, norms to protect children’s rights and policies to combat economic vulnerability and discrimination. Policy outcomes that support resilience will be directed toward interventions aimed at supporting and improving parenting skills, fostering strong relationships with children, and promoting resilience in children. A key component of policy development is inclusion to address social inequities that lead to poverty, discrimination, homelessness, and deprivation.