



Protecting Your Child's Health from Toxic (harmful) Stress

Why talk about toxic (harmful) stress? We all work hard to stay healthy. We need to talk about toxic stress and harmful childhood experiences to give our children and ourselves a healthy life. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are harmful experiences that occur during childhood. Some stress is normal but too much can cause problems.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) measured these ACEs:

Exposure to these caregiver behaviors:

- Humiliating child
- Insulting child
- Swearing at child
- Pushing, grabbing, slapping child
- Making child afraid of being hurt
- Inappropriate sexual contact
- Child did not feel loved
- Family members not supportive

Exposure to these household issues:

- Domestic violence
- Household member with substance abuse
- Household member with mental illness
- Household member attempted suicide
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

What health problems are associated with ACEs?

In the CDC study, 17,000 people participated. **More than 60 percent of people had been exposed to at least one ACE!** Twelve percent of people had been exposed to four or more. ACEs can cause stress and problems in children and can cause problems throughout life. The more exposure to ACEs, the more likely it was that people had these problems:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Cancer
- Liver disease
- Intimate partner violence
- Depression
- Suicide attempts
- Poor anger control
- Smoking
- Substance abuse issues
- Multiple sexual partners
- Unintended pregnancies
- Fetal death

Are there other ACEs: Yes, although not studied in the CDC study, other ACEs are:

- Witnessing community violence
- Poverty
- Homelessness
- Bullying by peers, siblings, others
- Death of a parent

Why are ACEs associated with health problems?

Adverse childhood experiences may cause harmful stress. If there are no protective factors, such as strong parents, then harmful stress steers people toward unhealthy habits. These habits include overeating, smoking, alcohol abuse, drug abuse and early sexual behavior. ACEs may cause genetic changes by turning on or turning off genes that affect health (see Figure). **For good health, children need protective factors and awesome childhood experiences.**

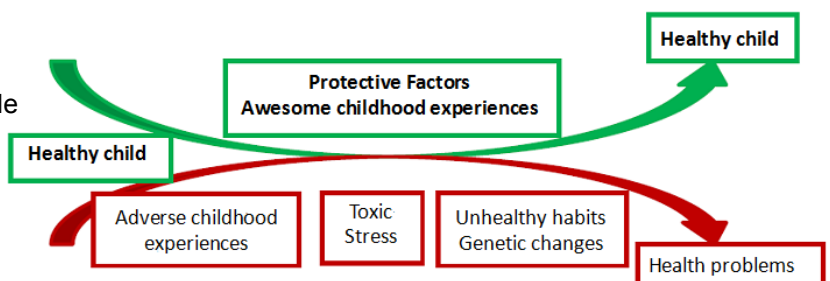


Figure: Why ACEs are associated with health problems.



Good news! You can do something about ACEs.

Think about your early years. Do not be afraid to remember and talk about your own experiences. More than 60 percent of people report at least one ACE. What have you learned about how to overcome adversity and protect yourself? Use what you have learned to build the ability to bounce back after a negative event and protect your child from ACEs.

Build resiliency with protective factors.

Parents make a significant difference in their child's life. **Instead of adverse childhood experiences, try to expose your child to awesome childhood experiences!** One of the most important things a parent can do is spend time with their child. Letting them know that they are loved, that they have a purpose in life, and that they have people they can go to if bad things happen are very important. This is called building resiliency. Resiliency happens when the child has "protective factors"—like a shield to protect them from ACEs. Examples of protective factors are:

- Parents who are strong, loving, supportive and resilient
- Parents who read and talk to their children
- Having healthy relationships with parents, other family members and friends
- Learning good communication skills
- Learning why and how to make good choices

Challenges will always happen in life, but children who have protective factors—who have become more resilient—can make it through them more successfully and become healthy adults.

Use appropriate parenting strategies.

- Teach children how to respond to aggression and how not to be a victim.
- Use appropriate discipline strategies.
 - Set rules and limits. **Children want and need you to teach them what is allowed.**
 - Then, if children continue to have challenging behavior:
 - Redirect children toward positive behaviors.
 - Avoid yelling and spanking.
 - When calm, have discussions about why they should behave a certain way.
- Be consistent. It is stressful to hear mixed messages. If you do not mean it, do not say it.
- Avoid exposure to violence in the media, at home and in the community. Otherwise, children will learn to think that violence is normal.
 - Limit media with lots of violence.
 - Do not let your child grow up in a home where they are often exposed to people who are physically or emotionally hurtful.

When ACEs cause problems:

- **Listen to your child's needs, fears and concerns.** You may need to modify daily activities to help them through a rough period. Give lots of support and reassurance. Let your child know that you and other supportive adults are always available.
- **Talk!** Do not feel embarrassed to ask for help. Think about how ACEs affect you and your parenting. If ACEs are causing problems in your home, talk to family members, trusted friends or a professional. Your child's doctor or health care provider can review your individual situation and make suggestions, as needed.

Resources:

- CDC website about ACEs: www.cdc.gov/ace/index.htm
- Learn appropriate parenting strategies: www.healthychildren.org
- Community services and resources: www.211.org
- Center for Effective Parenting: www.arkansasparenting.org