

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

How childhood events may have lasting health effects

Sometimes childhood events leave children sad, angry, afraid, or depressed. These experiences are sometimes called “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACEs). Learn how we can help your child and family learn to cope after an event.

Have you ever wondered why some people just seem to experience more hardship than others? Perhaps you know someone who lost his or her job. Around the same time, they find out they have a major health problem. Is it just a rash of bad luck?

These series of misfortunes may not have to do with luck at all, but rather may be the result of events that occurred years before. These events may have occurred as early as childhood. These events are sometimes called “adverse childhood experiences”.

What are adverse childhood experiences?

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are harmful experiences that cause stress on a child. This stress may lead to harmful health outcomes as they grow. These can have a lasting impact on their life that may cause multiple setbacks.

"The brain pathways are very flexible. A highly stressful environment releases stress hormones over and over. This impacts the developing brain of your child," explains Sue Schell, Vice President and Clinical Director of Behavioral Health at Children's HealthSM. "When the stress continues over time, it becomes toxic. When this happens, it affects their health and emotional development."

Breaking the ACEs cycle

Our behavioral health team at Children's Health helps families learn about ACEs and the stress their child may be experiencing. The team uses an “integrated behavioral health program” to work with families and their child’s doctor. Through the program, pediatricians recognize when a child is struggling and will refer them to this team who can meet and talk with the child and family. This may include a review of any ACEs to find the best treatment if needed.

When your child is referred to us, we will screen them for sources of toxic stress, including:

- Poverty
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Having a family member in prison
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse in the home
- Losing a caregiver through divorce, death, or imprisonment

We are a team of counselors, social workers, and marriage and family counselors who work with your child's doctor. Together, we will treat, support, educate and refer your family as needed. Our goal is to break the cycle of ongoing negative health effects caused by ACEs.

ACEs are a family matter

The effect of ACEs does not just impact children. Many times, poverty, stress, and trauma may have been part of the family going back many, many years. Often parents themselves have not had the chance to learn the skills to cope. This makes it harder for them to help their child.

Our goal is to address problems as they happen in your child, to prevent the negative effects later in life. "We are trying to find problems when they're occurring in your child's life, so that we can help to solve the problem early," says Schell. "We now know that if we can help you and your child build a healthy relationship, and reduce environmental stress, we can change how their brain is developing. If we can do this, it can change how their body responds to stress in the future."

A common event we see is a child struggling in school and their behavior suggests they may have ADHD. Their doctor refers them to our behavioral health team. We talk with you about the situation and find that daily stress or some past event is impacting your child. When children are under too much stress whether it's from a current situation or past event, it shows in their behavior. We will work with you and your child to understand the concern and develop therapies for your child and family. This might include teaching self-care skills, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques. We might also help you understand how eating, sleep and well-being affect your child and family.

"We're teaching you at the same time we're teaching your child," says Schell. "Everything's connected. We can help you find resources to learn how to cope and that in turn helps your child."

For more information about adverse childhood experiences and the impact they may have on your child or a child you know, speak with your child's doctor.