

# Parents Page

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## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

**STRESS!** It's an unavoidable part of life.

While some stress can be beneficial to our development and learning, most people think of stress in a negative sense. Do you feel like screaming or pulling your hair out when you see or hear the word? Our bodies were designed to cope with short term stress by increasing adrenaline in what is known as the fight or flight syndrome. However when children are repeatedly exposed to stress for long periods of time- weeks, months or even years- the stress becomes toxic & their fight or flight stress response can get so overwhelmed it can cause permanent changes in the development of their brain.

John Medina, author of Brain Rules, asserts "Out-of-control stress is bad news for the brains of most people". In this article I want to address the consequences of long term stress also known as chronic or toxic stress.

Kristin Schubert from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation states:

Every day, there are young children who are abused. Who witness violence in their homes or neighborhoods. Who are malnourished. Or who have parents who struggle with drug or alcohol use. We now know that those adverse experiences change the way their young brains develop and affect their mental and physical well-being later in life. These children are more likely to have heart disease, cancer and hypertension as adults. They are more likely to use drugs, suffer from depression and commit suicide. They are more likely to drop out of school, spend time in prison, and be homeless.

Writing about the effects of childhood stress, Jennifer Middlebrooks & Natalie Audage, state:

Intensive and prolonged stress can lead to a variety of short and long term negative health effects. It can disrupt early brain development and compromise functioning of the nervous and immune systems. In addition, childhood stress can lead to health problems later in life including alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

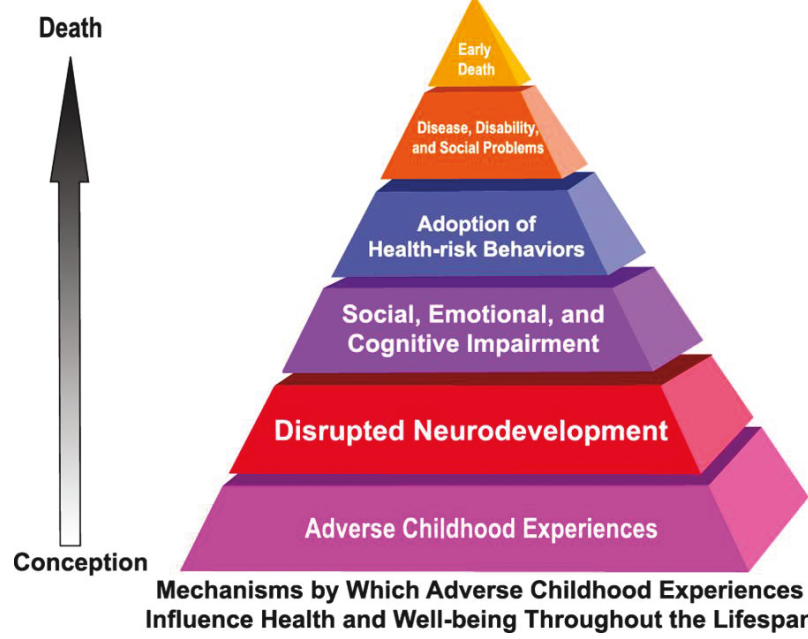
The stressors described by Schubert and the negative consequences described by Middlebrooks and Audage are the result of a significant research study on Adverse Childhood Experiences, now identified as ACES, which was first conducted in the 1990's and over 17,000 adults participated in the study. The purpose of the study was to find out how many of the participants, as children, had experienced:

1. emotional, physical or sexual abuse
2. emotional or physical neglect
3. witnessing mother being treated violently
4. substance abuse in the home
5. a household member having a mental illness
6. parents separating or getting divorced
7. someone in the home being incarcerated.

A "yes" response to any of the ten topics equals one point. The higher the number of points increases the likelihood of negative health problems such as:

- Alcohol abuse & alcoholism
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Depression
- Fetal death
- Illicit drug use
- Ischemic heart disease
- Liver disease
- Risk for intimate partner violence
- Multiple sexual partners
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Smoking
- Suicide attempts
- Unintended pregnancies

Vincent J. Felitti, MD, one of the original



researchers in the initial ACE study, claims "Adverse childhood experiences are the most basic and long-lasting cause of health risk behaviors, mental illness, social malfunction, disease, disability, death and healthcare costs".

If you haven't heard of the ACE study before you're likely not alone because it's been said that the ACE study is probably the most important public health study you never heard of. This study is important because children who grow up with high ACE scores become teens with high ACE scores who are likely to struggle in school and possibly drop out, abuse drugs and alcohol, experience depression or other risk factors. Of course teens with high ACE scores become adults with high ACE scores who experience mental health issues, violent relationship issues as well as health issues that lead to early death.

If you're a parent, grandparent, guardian, or foster parent who is interested in the health and wellbeing of your children or teens what can you do to help? You find out more about ACES by checking out websites [acesstoohigh.com](http://acesstoohigh.com) and [cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acesstudy/index.htm](http://cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acesstudy/index.htm). You can also strive to change any stressful situations at home. John Medina claims "one of the greatest predictors of performance in school turns out to be the emotional stability of the home". Research shows that providing stable, responsive, nurturing relationships as early in life as possible can prevent or even reverse the damaging effects of childhood adversity with lifelong benefits for learning, behavior and health. You and your children can also utilize counseling to process the adverse childhood experiences of the past in order to have a hopeful, productive life in the future. For more information about counseling services contact Community Counseling Solutions at 541-575-1466.

### References

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