



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A Public Health Approach to
Fighting ACEs in Palm Beach County**
Opportunities for Levers of Change and Innovation

overview

FIGHTING THE IMPACT OF EARLY ADVERSITY

Center for Child Counseling's Fighting ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Initiative, launched in 2016 with funding from Quantum Foundation, promotes a Public Health Approach to preventing and healing the effects of early adversity and trauma at the individual, family, and community levels. The foundation of this approach is working with our partners to build healthier, safer, more nurturing families and communities — where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

One of the primary goals of the initiative is for providers, educators, caregivers, and child-serving systems to shift their practice (or 'way of being' with children, families, and communities who have experienced adversity and trauma) from a "What's wrong with you?" to a "What happened to you?" approach—but going much deeper, using a prevention and healing-centered lens that focuses on changing the systems that keep adversity and trauma firmly in place. The core of this approach is looking at how we, as a community, can address the pair of ACEs (Adverse Community Environments AND Adverse Childhood Experiences) to disrupt the cycle of adversity and trauma.

We believe it is every child's right to grow up feeling safe and nurtured, in communities where they can thrive. We believe our children and the next generation deserve better and we know we can effectively address this public health crisis together.

Through co-location and in close partnership with other community-wide efforts and the communities served, Fighting ACEs aims to buffer and stop the intergenerational cycle of abuse and violence; prevent mental and physical health concerns that may develop as a result of ACEs and trauma; eliminate racial and ethnic barriers to accessing quality behavioral health prevention, early intervention and treatment; and build awareness and the capacity of each community to effectively address ACEs in a trauma-informed approach.

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The Florida Department of Health in Palm Beach County supports the Fighting ACEs Initiative work in our community. Prevention must start as early as possible to have the maximum impact on the lives of our future generations. We need to focus on the prevention of Adverse Childhood Experiences, which means working with children and families well before they reach middle school or adulthood.”

- Dr. Alina Alonso
Director, Florida Department of Health
Palm Beach County



'Pair of ACEs' THE NEED

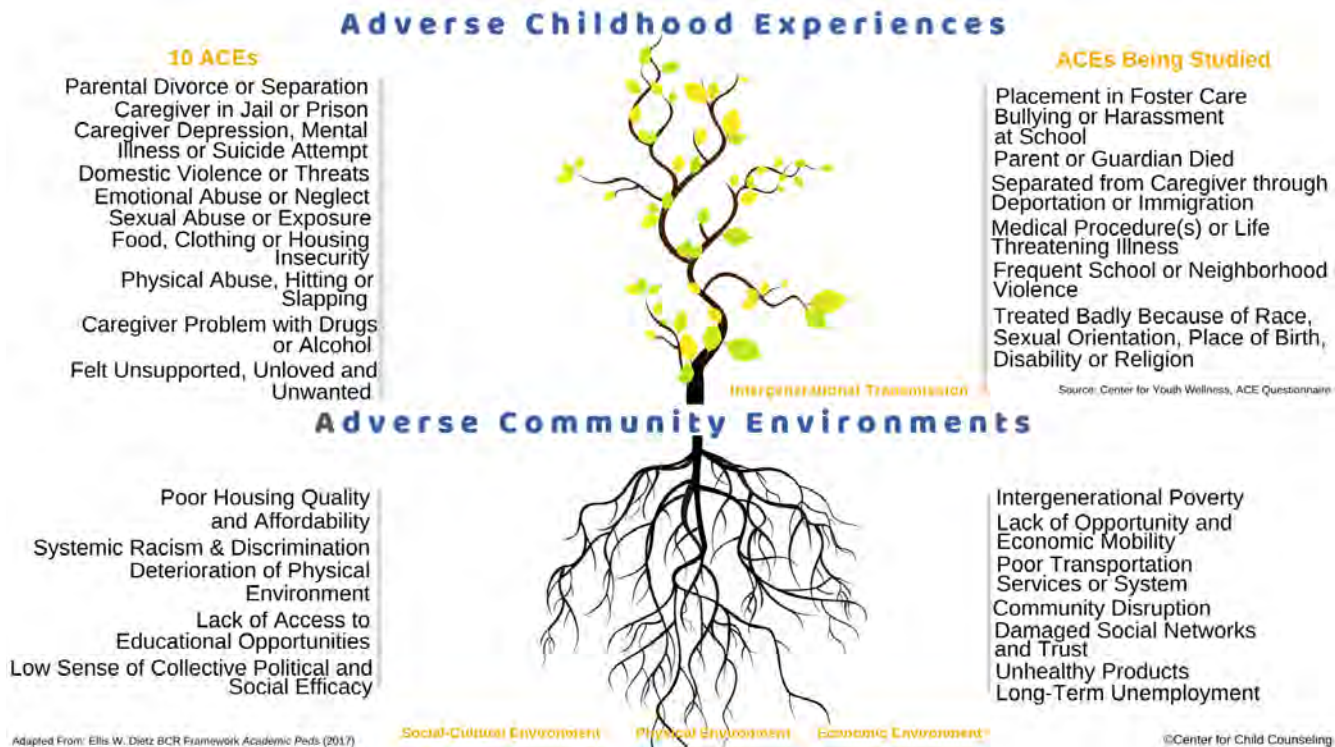
The impact of ACEs has been called the single greatest unaddressed public health threat facing our nation today.

The science of early adversity tells us that toxic stress in childhood changes the architecture of the developing brain. As a result, it impacts everything—classroom behaviors, learning and comprehension, the ability to self-regulate—and heightens the risk for future mental and physical health problems.

Trauma isn't something a child simply outgrows. If issues aren't addressed early, they often lead to lifelong physical and mental health problems—a decades-long ripple effect felt by the individual, his or her family, and the community. Education about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is critical. Early intervention is imperative. Adults who had 4 or more ACEs have a 1200% increased risk of suicide and are two times more likely to smoke, develop heart disease, or cancer. They are seven times more likely to abuse alcohol. For every \$1 we spend to treat early childhood trauma, it costs at least \$8 to treat the effects of that trauma in adulthood.

Research shows that the places where young children live can threaten healthy development and shapes the trajectory of growth in profound ways. Even if a family can provide sanctuary in their home, children can still experience adversity outside their home which can affect overall healthy development, mental health, and well-being. A study conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation showed that the zip code in which a child is born is often a better predictor of their future lives than their own genetic makeup.

It is imperative to find or develop secure and supportive environments outside the home where children can develop and feel safe.



The tree above represents the possible adversity children face due to the circumstances, families, and communities in which they live.

Impact of ACEs

THE NUMBERS

- About 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states reported that they had experienced at least one type of ACE, and nearly 1 in 6 reported they had experienced four or more types of ACEs.
- Preventing ACEs could potentially reduce a large number of health conditions. For example, up to 1.9 million cases of heart disease and 21 million cases of depression could have been potentially avoided by preventing ACEs.
- Some children are at greater risk than others. Women and several racial/ethnic minority groups were at greater risk for having experienced 4 or more types of ACEs.
- ACEs are costly. The economic and social costs to families, communities, and society totals hundreds of billions of dollars each year.

Source: Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

The Economic Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



Return on Investment

<p>For every \$1 spent on ACEs prevention, society gets a \$8 ROI over a person's lifetime.</p> <h1 style="font-size: 2em;">ROI</h1> <h1 style="font-size: 3em;">8:1</h1>	\$100,000+ more in lifetime earnings
	\$15,000+ more in taxes paid
	\$28,000+ healthcare savings
	\$7,000+ public services savings

We know ACEs are common, but we also know they affect some populations more than others. Children raised in disadvantaged neighborhoods (which are disproportionately communities of color) are at greater risk for trauma and tend to have less opportunity to be exposed to positive, life-expanding experiences that other children may take for granted like visiting parks, zoos, museums, theaters, etc. The neighborhoods of lower income families are also less well-stocked with other foundational community resources for success like quality schools, access to health care, social amenities and services like fire stations, libraries, child- and elder-care facilities, and opportunities for employment with fair wages.

Disadvantaged neighborhoods share certain physical characteristics such as lack of affordable, quality housing, few open spaces for play like parks, inadequate street lighting that can facilitate crime, poor maintenance of abandoned or derelict buildings, and even broken sidewalks that make walking difficult. These neighborhoods have less access to public transport and can even be what are known as “food deserts” where there is little access to nutritious, fresh food. People who live in these neighborhoods suffer disproportionate levels of stress and their children do, too.

Disparate health outcomes based on different communities or neighborhoods are an example of health inequity, which the World Health Organization defines as “differences in health status or in the distribution of health resources between different population groups, arising from the social conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Health inequities are unfair and could be reduced by the right mix of government policies.” Health inequity is a systematic difference in the opportunities groups have to achieve optimal health. Tens of thousands of children in the United States alone are born disadvantaged simply because the opportunity to achieve optimal health is not built into their communities.



Nobody is immune to adverse experiences in childhood, but for some population groups, there's a larger burden of adversity than others. We need to focus on targeting limited resources to the people at greatest risk and making sure those resources go into programs that reduce or mitigate adversity."

- Jack Shonkoff, M.D.,
Director, Harvard Center for the Developing Child

A Public Health Approach

THE SOLUTION

The Fighting ACEs Initiative aims to raise awareness about the impact of adversity and trauma in childhood on health and wellness throughout the lifespan. Building a resilient community to support child well-being is the overarching goal. Experiences build brains. Buffering relationships, hope, and resilience can grow and be impacted by environments. **The more positive factors a child has in play, the better the outcome for that child and the community at large.** The bottom-up approach of building the capacity of individuals and caregivers should be amplified through the education and engagement of community systems and sectors in which the children and families interact and are impacted by.

The public health approach is a framework for understanding the impact of ACEs across a lifespan and how unbuffered toxic stress can impact the communities where we live, work, and play. **Utilizing a public health framework will allow us to have wider-ranging impact than the traditional disease-centric model which addresses health as the absence of illness.** Public health draws on a science base that is multi-disciplinary and thus requires a broad range of cross-sector partners.

So many of the activities in the mental health field focus on ‘fixing’ the child or family. As leaders in our community, we must be courageous advocates for changing the systems that keep problems and community trauma in place. **We must be vocal about how racism impacts the mental health of our black and brown children throughout their lifespan.** We must create safe places for children to express themselves and heal. **Until we get to the root of systemic racism, many issues will remain unresolved in our society, especially the mental health of our children.**



THE EVIDENCE

With science and best practices guiding the organization’s approach, Center for Child Counseling is a uniquely qualified leader for the Fighting ACEs Initiative. The experience, knowledge, and expertise gained from being on the frontlines and a part of the fabric of communities served for over twenty-one years. In addition to the science and experience, the initiative is driven by the voices and stories of thousands of children and families facing adversity, toxic stress, and trauma served. **This experience is crucial to understanding and guiding partners on buffering, nurturing attachment, and resilience building.**

With the help of forward-thinking Palm Beach County funders (including Quantum, Florida Blue, Farris, and Lost Tree Foundations), partners, and initiatives such as Birth to 22, Center for Child Counseling’s trauma-informed community approach includes **evidence-based ACEs screening in childcare and pediatric settings**, and **community-wide ACEs awareness efforts**. Additionally, through the organization’s Institute for Clinical Training, we work to **build the community’s capacity to buffer the effects of ACEs through appropriate prevention, education, and early intervention strategies.**



A CALL TO ACTION

To effectively address spiraling rates of depression and suicide, school shootings, addiction, child abuse, and numerous other social challenges, further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must get to the root of the issue: ACEs. **Palm Beach County is well positioned for action.** Funders, collaboratives, and the broader community are positioned to consider a plan to specifically address ACEs and trauma. A community readiness survey revealed the attitude in the community as: **“We are concerned about this and we want to do something about it.”**

The Fighting ACEs Initiative recommends a Public Health Approach targeting the earliest years, when the largest return on investment is available, maximizing efforts across sectors throughout the County. We believe that the evidence of the effectiveness and promise of early intervention validates a paradigm shift that focuses on prevention without sacrificing current efforts. Next steps of this white paper include encouraging a prioritization of efforts based on the resources, collaborative efforts, structure, and momentum currently available in Palm Beach County.

A *Public Health Approach to Fighting ACEs* in Palm Beach County is the start of an optimistic plan that will involve every sector pulling together for the common good. **Our willingness to search together for practical, implementable solutions is the foundation of lasting change.**



VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Resiliency Building Experiences

Buffering Relationships

- Feels Loved by Parent(s) or Primary Caregiver
- Supportive Family Relationships
- Supportive Community Relationships
- Parent(s) or Primary Caregiver Enjoy Playing with Child
- Relatives Provide Support When Sad or Worried
- Caring Neighbors or Family Friends
- Support from Teacher, Coach, Youth Leader, or Minister



Hope and Resilience

- Family Cares about Child's School Work and Performance
- Family, Neighbors, and Friends Talk About Making Lives Better
- Rules, Structure, and Expectations in Household
- Someone Trusted to Talk to When Feeling Bad
- Adults Who Notice Child's Strengths and Accomplishments
- Sense of Independence
- Positive Outlook on Life

Positive Community Environments

- Available, Affordable Quality Housing
- No Racism or Discrimination
- Clean and Safe Physical Environment
- Access to Educational Opportunities
- High Sense of Collective Political and Social Efficacy



Physical Environment Economic Environment Social-Cultural Environment

- Lots of Opportunity and Economic Mobility
- Quality Transportation Services or System
- Cohesive Social Networks and Trust
- Access to Healthy Products and Foods
- Employment Opportunities

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The tree above depicts resiliency building experiences at the individual, family, and community levels.

If we truly believe the science and the twenty years of research available to us on the topics of ACEs, trauma, and the impact of unbuffered toxic stress, then we cannot afford a "business as usual" attitude.

We are at the tipping point where awareness must become action. Information alone does not change behavior; however, if we have systemic reinforcements, we can create a coordinated effort for tangible, sustainable change. Our vision is powerful and ambitious.

We believe our children and the next generation deserve better. We know we can effectively address this public health crisis together, with a public health approach, if we can move past inertia and give our aspirations the chance to grow and bear fruit.

JOIN THE FIGHT



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I implore you to ask: What would you do for your own child? Think of these children as your own. Because they are ours, and our responsibility together. If we act now, ACEs can end with this generation."

- Julie Fisher Cummings
Lovelight Foundation Founder and ACEs Activist



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