

# What are ACEs?

ACEs are Adverse Childhood Experiences – situations where a child faces some sort of trauma or intense, sustained stress.

ACEs typically fall into three categories:

- Abuse – physical, emotional, or sexual
- Neglect – physical or emotional
- Household dysfunction

The most common ACEs children face come from:

- Financial hardship
- Issues around divorce
- Seeing or being a victim of violence (including domestic violence)
- Living with someone who has a mental illness
- Living with someone who abuses drugs or alcohol
- Having a parent or caregiver in prison

ACEs can change or damage a child's developing brain. The harm can be so bad that it only shows up decades later. ACEs can cause mental illness and physical diseases. ACEs are at the root of most violence.

Sadly, it is not rare for a child to experience these situations. It's estimated that nearly half of U.S. children (45%) have experienced at least one ACE, while 10% have experienced at least three of these traumatic events.

## What the Science Shows

This information is based on studies that show a direct link between difficulties experienced in childhood and poor mental and physical health in adulthood.

## Damage From ACEs

A young child who lives with violence, abuse, and neglect is exposed to what is called "toxic stress". This puts them at high risk for problems that lead to poor health and behavioral choices for their whole lives.

Toxic stress caused by ACEs can:

- Interfere with a child's healthy brain development which can lead to learning difficulties
- Alter a child's body functioning, increasing the risk of cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and many other conditions
- Change how a child's genes are coded which can be passed from generation to generation

# There is Hope

The good news is that children are generally adaptable and resilient. Studies show that the presence of just one positive adult influence in a child's life can buffer against toxic stress and reduce the effects of ACEs. Childhood trauma isn't something you just "get over" as you grow up but the effects of ACEs can be lessened or even prevented by introducing positive influences and ensuring appropriate care.

## Center for Child Counseling is a Resource for You.

Our services focus on preventing and healing the effects of adverse experiences, trauma, and toxic stress on children and their caregivers. Promoting resiliency and building healthy family, school, and community relationships is at the core of our mission.

We support children, families, and caregivers through direct services and support. Our expert therapists use Play Therapy and an array of best-practice interventions to help children understand their experiences and cope with their emotions.

We also offer training for groups like teachers and school administrators on the subject of ACEs and childhood mental health.

## What Educators Can Do:

- Be trauma-informed and ACEs-aware
- Educate yourself on the effects and implications of ACEs
- Refer children to age-appropriate mental health service providers
- Request professional training from Center for Child Counseling
- Screen for ACEs using the free, anonymous online survey

[www.centerforchildcounseling.org/FightingACEs](http://www.centerforchildcounseling.org/FightingACEs)

## Our Mission

Center for Child Counseling is building the foundation for playful, healthful, and hopeful living for children, families, and communities.

## Our Vision

Healthy, resilient children and families through ACEs-aware and trauma-informed communities.



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# ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES What Educators Need to Know



**FIGHTING  
ACEs**  
Because Kids Grow Up



## ACEs and a Child's Education

As professional educators know, children reach developmental milestones that indicate if they're maturing and behaving appropriately. These physical and behavioral indicators can be relatively straightforward to assess. Brain development is harder to evaluate but it affects everything a child thinks, says, and does.

Toxic stress caused by ACEs changes the way neural networks form and perform, which, in turn, changes the way a child processes information, responds, and behaves. This sustained negative stress hijacks a child's ability to think, reason, self-regulate, and make good decisions.

**A child with ACEs may not have the cognitive ability to perform as other students do.**

### Behaviors You Might Observe:

- Impulsivity, aggression, non-compliance, and defiance
- Perfectionism, overcompliance
- A need to always be "good" or "in control"
- Withdrawal or refusal to join in
- Substance abuse/self-medicating
- Many behaviors that mimic those associated with a mental health diagnosis (e.g., ADHD, ODD, conduct disorder, anxiety, depression)

### Social-Emotional Indicators:

- Inability to regulate emotions
- Oppositional relationships with school staff or authority figures
- Difficulty with peer relationships
- Inability to appreciate another's perspective
- Intense reactivity
- Associating with maladaptive peers

### Leisha's Life: ACEs in the Classroom

3 Years Old

4 Years Old

ACE  
#1

5 Years Old

ACE  
#2

6 Years Old

7 Years Old

ACE  
#3

8 Years Old

### ACE #1

Leisha's parents divorce and her father moves away. She is also separated from her beloved big brother.

#### Lifetime Impact of ACE #1

- Leisha doesn't know where her father is. She doesn't understand why she has been abandoned.
- Leisha doesn't have the language skills to explain these feelings.
- She expresses her anxiety with anger and tantrums.
- Children fear and avoid her; Leisha becomes isolated.
- Leisha learns she cannot rely on people.
- She refuses to display any vulnerability or express any need.
- Her ability to ever develop trusting, meaningful adult relationships is already compromised.

### ACE #2

Leisha's mother struggles to pay her bills and provide stability. A car accident leaves Leisha's mother seriously injured. She loses her job. Leisha often has to care for her.

#### Lifetime Impact of ACE #1-2

- At school, Leisha lashes out and disrupts class.
- She responds disproportionately to seemingly small events.
- She cannot moderate her behaviors or emotions.
- She is verbally and physically abusive.
- Leisha discovers alcohol. It helps her to forget her anger.
- She steals beer from her parents and offers it to her friends.
- Teachers and her friends' parents label her a "problem child".

### ACE #3

Leisha moves into her grandparents' home. Her grandfather belittles her; he calls her stupid and fat. Leisha is emotionally neglected.

#### Lifetime Impact of ACE #1-3

- Leisha feels helpless but she can control what she eats.
- She develops an eating disorder which worsens with guilt & shame.
- Poor nutrition and the chemical imbalances caused by ACEs mean it's very hard for Leisha to concentrate and learn.
- Leisha is held back a grade. Other children think she's stupid.
- Parents discourage their children from associating with Leisha.
- To boost her poor self-esteem, Leisha allows older boys to touch her.
- Leisha drops out of school at the age of 15.