

ACEs, Trauma & Resilience

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

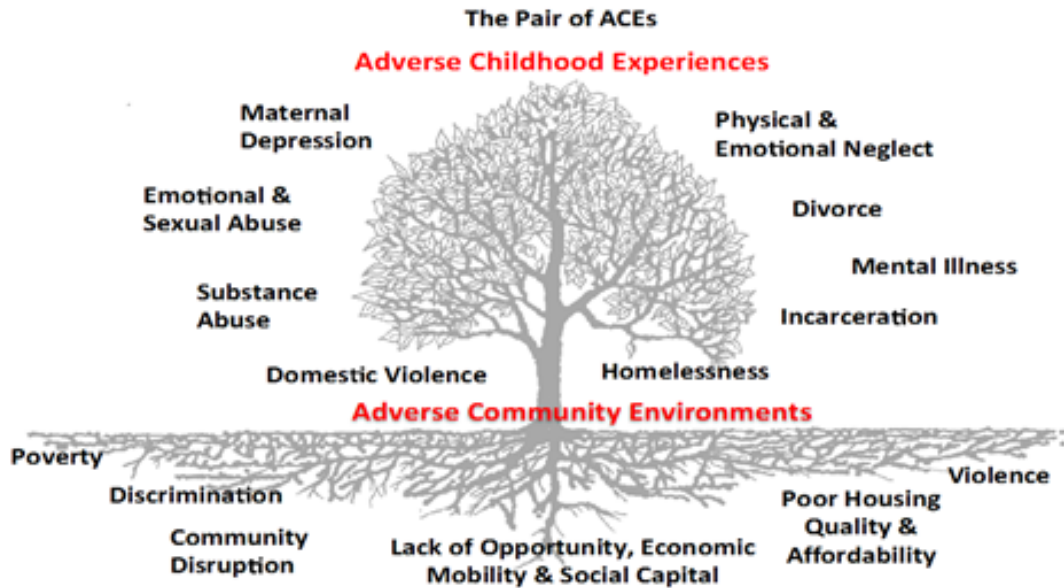
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur before a child turns 18. These events can be especially traumatizing before the age of 8. These can include:

- verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- witnessing intimate partner violence
- having a household member with mental illness, substance use disorder, or alcohol use disorder
- losing a parent to divorce, incarceration, suicide, or other death

The impact of ACEs can be exacerbated by traumatic environments. These include living in poverty, experiencing racism, food apartheid, lack of quality health care, high rates of unemployment/lack of jobs, and high crime neighborhoods.

The impact of ACEs was first understood through a study completed by Drs. Felitti and Anda in California in 1995. This study compiled health information for 17,000 adults and found ACEs are unfortunately very common. Research suggests that around 60% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one ACE, and close to 1/5 have experienced four or more.

The higher the ACE score was, the more likely the respondents were to be in poor health.



Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017) A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model. *Academic Pediatrics*. 17 (2017) pp. S86-S93. DOI information: 10.1016/j.acap.2016.12.011

Experiencing ACEs causes the body to go through the stress response cycle, which engages the immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems. This cycle is normal and necessary. However, going through multiple ACEs without a chance to “reboot” means the body’s stress response does not have a chance to turn off. This causes what we call “toxic stress” and can have an inhibitory effect on children’s ability to learn and to regulate emotions, and creates an overactivation of the stress response system, which can have lasting debilitating impacts. (Center on the Developing Child, 2022).

In Kent County, 47.9% of children, or an estimated 1 million children, experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (2011 survey).

This is a staggering challenge, but we can prevent our community’s children from experiencing toxic stress and trauma in their early years.

That’s the driving force behind the work we do in our Connections and Healthy Families Kent County programs.

Trauma Is Not Destiny!

Becoming trauma informed is the first step toward preventing ACEs and their impact on children and families. Trauma-engaged practice involves understanding the effects of ACEs and using all available resources to mitigate those effects both directly and indirectly. This includes policy change, helping children build resilience, working to disrupt racist structures, and furthering ACE education.

Resilience

The fulcrum in the middle can be moved one way or the other based on access to health care, safe environments, and stable households. The scale can tip toward positive outcomes if the child has developed resilience. As supportive adults, we have the power to “tip the scales” to ensure positive outcomes for children in our communities. (Center on the Developing Child, 2015).



The following factors can help children build resilience:

- Supportive relationships between adults and children
- Scaffolding learning to help children build self-efficacy
- Strengthening skills like adaptability and self-regulation
- Building a stable foundation of hope using cultural/faith traditions

The Center for Social Policy outlines both protective factors and promotive factors. They emphasize that protective factors “mitigate or eliminate risk” while promotive factors “actively enhance well-being” and that “taken together, protective and promotive factors increase the probability of positive, adaptive, and healthy outcomes, even in the face of risk and adversity” (2018).



Looking for more resources like this? We have a page dedicated to trauma and resilience efforts on our website.

Scan the QR code to learn more:

