



ACES, TOXIC STRESS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Part of a series on social-emotional development for Too Small to Fail.

I. Children face adversity, but a nurturing environment can protect them and help them learn.

The number of children exposed to adversity in the United States is at crisis level. Almost half (46 percent) of American children have suffered at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), and 11 percent have experienced three or more.¹ ACEs are stressful experiences in childhood, such as emotional or physical abuse, or witnessing the abuse of a loved one; parental mental illness; an incarcerated or drug-dependent household member; and divorce. These early adverse experiences negatively impact growing brains and bodies.

But research shows that children who have at least one safe and supportive relationship with a caring adult can be protected from the long-term effects of ACEs.² Furthermore, when adults provide nurturing and loving support to their children starting

at birth, they help their children's social-emotional development—an aspect of brain development that helps children learn, form stable relationships, and manage their feelings. The more loving support a child receives from their parent or caregiver, the better developed their social-emotional skills, even in challenging, high-stress environments.

II. Early adversity can have lifelong impacts on learning, health, and opportunity.

All humans have a physiological stress response that helps us respond appropriately to stressors or threats in our environments. When young children experience severe, repeated adverse experiences, their bodies and brains go on permanent high alert, releasing stress hormones that affect their learning and development. This "toxic stress" can negatively impact not only how a child learns, but also how she builds relationships, manages emotions, fights off infections, and develops physically.³ As a result,

Defining the Terms

ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful experiences in childhood, such as emotional or physical abuse, neglect, an incarcerated or drug-dependent household member, parental mental illness, divorce, and others.

Toxic Stress

A physiological response that occurs when the body's stress response system is activated for long periods of time. Toxic stress can harm physical health, learning and development. ACEs are serious risk factors for toxic stress, but there are other risk factors, such as poverty.

Social-Emotional Development

An aspect of typical brain development that includes the ability to build relationships, identify feelings, and manage behavior. Social-emotional development occurs in all children. The quality of children's social-emotional development depends both on genetics and their experiences, including support from parents and caregivers.

Parents Can Make the Difference

Caring interventions from a parent or caregiver can prevent ACEs from becoming toxic stress, and even reverse the effects of stress after it has occurred.



toxic stress can leave lasting marks on a child's academic and life outcomes. ACEs are serious risk factors for toxic stress, but there are other risk factors, such as extreme poverty.

Individuals who have experienced six or more ACEs live roughly 20 fewer years than those experiencing none.⁴ But the negative effects of early adversity begin well before adulthood, and impact all areas of a child's life.⁵ Early adversity undermines healthy social-emotional development and other kinds of learning, making it harder for children to achieve goals, get along with others, regulate emotions, and do well in school.⁶ They may also find it more difficult to tell the difference between danger and safety; and, are at greater risk for anxiety, depression and violence. Also, children with four or more ACEs have double the risk of asthma, and are more likely to suffer from diseases like Type 2 diabetes.⁷

III. Stable, nurturing relationships between children and their caregivers protect children from toxic stress and help them learn.

But there is hope. Parents and caregivers who provide nurturing, stable relationships to children who have experienced early adversity support their healthy brain development and contribute to their social-emotional and physical well-being. Even adults who have experienced their own ACEs, but have learned to manage their stress, can buffer a child's stress response. Caring relationships also provide the context for teaching children skills—like coping and adapting—that help them learn to manage their stress and strengthen their natural resilience.⁸

Notes

1. Child Trends, "Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State-Level Prevalence" (2014).
2. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Supportive Relationships and Active-Skill Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience" (2015).
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Capitalizing on Advances in Science to Reduce the Health Consequences of Early Adversity" (2015); CC. Raver and others, "Poverty, household chaos, and interparental aggression predict children's ability to recognize and modulate negative emotions" *Development and Psychopathology* 27(3) (2015): 695-708.
4. DW Brown and others, "Adverse childhood experiences and the risk of premature mortality," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 37(5) (2009): 389-96
5. Nadine J. Burke and others, "The impact of adverse childhood experiences on an urban pediatric population," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35(6) (2011): 408.
6. Children's Bureau, "Understanding the Effects of Child Maltreatment on Brain Development" (2015).
7. Bucci, M., Marques, S. S., Oh, D., & Harris, N. B. (2016). Toxic Stress in Children and Adolescents. *Advances in Pediatrics*, 63(1), 403-428.
8. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

This is a companion piece to Too Small to Fail's report, "Not Just "Soft Skills": How Young Children's Learning & Health Benefit from Strong Social-Emotional Development." To read the full report, visit toosmall.org

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