

As Your Child Grows – ACEs

Parents' safety concerns are always evolving as their children grow up. During Head Start, children need near-constant attention because their dependence on their caregivers is very great. As they get older, children become more independent, but parents still must be vigilant. As children start to make some of their own choices about what to do and who to spend time with, parents must start to adjust to a role that is like a guide as much as a protector. Good communication is the key to navigating this difficult transition.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Their Effects on Later Development

Research has shown that all forms of child abuse (physical, sexual, or psychological) as well as all levels of household dysfunction can have a real and lasting effect on a child's behavior patterns as well as on the development of the brain itself, with consequences that can potentially be life-long. These factors are termed Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs. The original ACEs study showed, and further research has confirmed, that these kinds of childhood experiences are more widespread than was previously understood. A higher number of Adverse Childhood Experiences is correlated with:

- Poor regulation of stress hormones
- Problems forming attachment
- Poor socialization
- High risk behaviors (smoking, obesity, substance abuse, promiscuity)
- Low self-esteem
- Physiological changes in the brain and body that can even affect DNA

The brain-body connection revealed by the ACEs study and later research on what's often called "toxic stress" is only beginning to be understood. Most troubling, it appears that the presence of too much or unmanaged stress can cause a child's brain to shut down, in a sense. This response is comparable to the fight-or-flight mode we have in dangerous situations, but instead of something that gets turned on and then off, it stays on all the time—to the point where it interferes with the child's ability to learn.

What hurts us or makes us feel unsafe or insecure as children can have repercussions later in life. These include depression, PTSD, drug or alcohol abuse, and even increased risk of health problems like heart disease and cancer. Worst of all, this often leads to the transmission of patterns of child abuse and dysfunction through to the next generation, in a vicious cycle.

The bit of good news in all of this is that children's brains are more resilient and with early intervention, more equipped to "re-wire" themselves when protective factors are present. One of the most significant protective factors is to have even one positive adult role model, and of course this can be—but doesn't need to be—a parent. From the point of view of this protective parent or other adult, the keys include:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Seeing to children's social and emotional development

You can learn more about ACEs studies at www.acestoohigh.com

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A Word on Corporal Punishment

Parents should be supported in developing nonviolent yet effective alternatives for disciplining their children, in order to avoid resorting to physical, or corporal, punishment. Numerous studies have found that corporal punishment increases the risk of enduring, negative developmental outcomes, and certainly no studies have found corporal punishment to increase developmental health.

DID YOU KNOW...

...that most cases of child abuse (as documented by child welfare authorities) are connected with a child being punished?

A pattern of corporal punishment OR emotional abuse puts pressure on a child that can lead to a state of perpetual fear and stress that is toxic. Physical punishment is essentially a shorthand way for dealing with parent/child conflict. While it may be able to eliminate the unwanted behavior in the short term, instead of the child internalizing why the behavior is unwanted and the moral reasons for avoiding it, the child tends to internalize the emotion associated with the punishment—which is a gut reaction of fear toward an otherwise trusted caregiver. This tends to result in unhealthy emotional responses later on, including:

- Childhood and adulthood depression, or other mental health issues
- Aggression and anti-social behavior
- Disruption of parent-child attachment
- Disruption of the brain's own chemical mechanisms for regulating stress
- In serious cases, slower cognitive development—including reduced academic achievement
- Increased vulnerability to drug abuse
- Decreased empathy
- Increase in bullying behaviors, defiance

Of course, there are other forms of abuse that aren't physical. Examples include:

- A pattern of psychological or emotional abuse, including: belittling, humiliating, ridiculing, rejecting, intimidating, threatening, and corrupting or exploiting (e.g. encouraging a child to engage in illegal activities)
- Custodial interference /family abduction /isolation from a safe co-parent
- Witnessed and indirect victimization. This can include seeing an assault by one parent or family member against another, an assault by a parent on a brother or sister, an assault on a family member by someone outside the household, or extreme violence or murder witnessed outside the home. This category can include the child victims of war or ethnic conflict.

While it may be impossible at all times to protect our children against all of these potential stressors, the first step in effective parenting is to be aware of the risks.

For further reading: www.sparethekids.com

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