



# TOPICS IN THE NEWS: ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1949, May has been designated Mental Health Awareness Month. This year, falling in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it could not have been timelier. With almost every aspect of normal daily life disrupted, each one of us has been impacted. The strain of sheltering at home, often in tight quarters, and the uncertainty of when it will end, compounds the anxiety felt over health, education, employment, and finances. The conditions have been described as a perfect storm for domestic violence and child abuse, especially in homes where these conditions were already present. With schools closed, children are not in contact with the teachers, counselors, coaches, and other adults who would normally notice signs of distress and be mandated reporters, leaving many cases unchecked. Children are especially vulnerable, because not only does the risk of abuse pose an immediate threat, but studies have documented that childhood traumatic experiences can have detrimental impacts on both physical health and social well-being as victims reach adulthood.

The landmark CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, released in 1998 after several years of research, revealed a link between childhood abuse and neglect and later physical and emotional challenges. In the study, more than 17,000 adults were surveyed about their current health status and behaviors and any past exposure to a set list of 10 types of adversity that were considered the most common to be experienced at home:

- Five personal - physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect.
- Five related to other family members - a parent who's an alcoholic, a mother who's a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment.

Coined Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), data showed that as these episodes accumulated, the greater the occurrence among those surveyed of serious health issues such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, and substance abuse, and social issues such as poor academic achievement, difficulty forming healthy relationships, and job instability. The study also showed that exposure to ACEs was extremely common; nearly two thirds of respondents reported having at least one; 13% reported having 4 or more.

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Research on ACEs has continued to develop. It is now considered a significant public health issue, yet still lacks widescale recognition among the public and even the medical field at large. Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, a reigning expert, herself had not heard of it until after completing medical school and starting practice in 2007. Because the impacts of ACEs are not irreparable, and because preventative strategies are available, increasing awareness is a keynote of her message:

“When you look at any successful public health campaign, it starts with raising awareness, so that people understand there is a problem to begin with. ACEs cross every line — racial, ethnic, geographic, gender, socio-economic. Today most parents are aware that secondhand smoke is really bad for kids, everyone has to wear a seatbelt, and lead is a neurotoxin. We need a national public campaign about toxic stress. We need to be shouting this from the rooftops.” ([“Treating the Lifelong Harm of Childhood Trauma”, Bornstein, David, New York Times, 1-30- 2018.](#))

Consider the sources listed below a step towards raising that awareness.

## RELATED CONCEPTS

- [Resilience](#): The ability to overcome serious hardship. Some children develop resilience, whereas others do not. Understanding why some children fare well despite adverse early experiences is crucial to informing policies and programs that help more children achieve their full potential.
- [Toxic Stress](#): Stress is a body’s normal reaction to new or startling experiences. It triggers the release of hormones that prompt it to respond accordingly. Research on the biology of stress has found that excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain, without the mitigating presence of a comforting or supportive adult, can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.
- [Trauma-informed Care](#): The likelihood of resilient outcomes is much greater when children who experience trauma have access to environments that are responsive to their specific needs. Families, schools, community-based programs, and other caregivers can increase the chances of resilience following childhood trauma when they become aware of the impact of childhood trauma, provide a sense of safety and predictability, protect children from further adversity, and offer pathways for their recovery.

## TO READ

- [CDC’s Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) webpage](#)  
Access the original CDC-Kaiser ACE study, find facts and statistics, prevention strategies, and more
- [Adverse Childhood Experiences: Looking at How ACEs Affect Our Lives & Society](#)  
An easy-to-read infographic from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
- [Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)  
National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Policy Report

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- [Children in Crisis, Detroit Free Press \(December 2019-January 2020\)](#)  
Former Detroit Free Press columnist Rochelle Riley studied how trauma and toxic environments impact how children learn. Children in Crisis is a series of articles from her studies.
  - [“Yes, Stress Really Is Making You Sick,”](#) Newsweek, March 2, 2020
  - [“How to Keep Children’s Stress From Turning Into Trauma,”](#) New York Times, May 7, 2020
  - [State ACES Action](#), ACEs Connection  
This advocacy group has gathered information on ACES-related legislation and other state actions across the U.S.

## TO WATCH

- [Paper Tigers](#)  
Follows a year in the life of an alternative high school that has radically changed its approach to disciplining its students, becoming a promising model for how to break the cycles of poverty, violence and disease that affect families.
- [Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope](#)  
A one-hour documentary that delves into the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the birth of a new movement to treat and prevent toxic stress.
- [TED Talk: How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime](#), Dr. Nadine Burke Harris

## NOTE:

If you need assistance accessing any of these resources, please email [librarian@michigan.gov](mailto:librarian@michigan.gov)