

Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Childhood experiences can greatly impact individuals in adulthood. Negative or positive experiences in childhood play a role in shaping how individuals respond to situations as they age. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are serious childhood traumas that result in stress, which can harm the developing brain. ACEs can lead to chronic health conditions and early death in adulthood.

What are ACEs?

The original ACE Study was conducted in Southern California in 1995-1997. Over 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members participated in the study, which included a physical examination and surveys about childhood trauma and current health status. All of the ACE questions refer the first 18 years of life. Two-thirds of the participants had at least one adverse childhood experience and 1 in 5 had three or more ACEs.

Since 2009, the ACE study has been conducted in several states, including Nebraska in 2010-2011. Of all of the states collecting data, the research showed a much high prevalence rate than researchers first anticipated. In Nebraska, over 50% or an estimated 1.37 million people report having at least one ACE. The highest individual ACEs were in household substance abuse and verbal abuse.

Nationally, common adverse childhood experiences include household substance abuse, parental separation or divorce, household mental illness, mother treated violently, incarcerated household member, emotional abuse or neglect, physical abuse or neglect, sexual abuse, and natural disasters.

There is a strong association between ACEs and some of the nation's worst health and social concerns. Individuals with 1 or more ACEs are at a greater risk for developing negative chronic health conditions or negative well-being outcomes. The more ACEs an individual has, the greater the risk. Exposure to ACEs increases the risk of:

- Substance Abuse
- Smoking
- COPD
- Heart disease
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation and/or attempts
- STDs
- Intimate partner violence
- Low academic achievement
- Teen Pregnancy

Prolonged exposure to stress can damage the developing brain and affect overall health and well-being. Stress can affect children in the following ways:

- Reduced ability to learn and problem solve
- Difficulty making friends and maintaining relationships
- Increase stress hormones, which can reduce the body's ability to fight infections



- Increased risk of developing aggressive behavior or anxiety
- Increases problems with memory

The ACEs study provides insight on the significant impact adverse childhood experiences have on the lifespan. The ACEs study can also help us begin to understand how to prevent these health and social problems that are linked to adverse childhood experiences.

Prevention strategies:

- Community education on ACEs
- Parenting classes for any new or expecting parents
- Supports for parents
- Therapeutic interventions for
 - Adults
 - Children
 - Children-Parent interaction
 - Family
- Positive youth development programs, like Teammates, Professional Partners Program etc.
- Assist youth in developing coping skills and stress reduction strategies
- Create environments that make children feel safe

ACEs are traumas that occur in childhood that can have lasting effects throughout the life span. ACEs are linked to several serious health and social concerns, like substance abuse, depression, intimate partner violence and more. They can also affect children's ability to learn and develop relationships early on in life. There are ways to prevent ACEs and help children cope through education and community support systems.

Resources:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jane-ellen-stevens/the-adverse-childhood-exp_7_b_1944199.html

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about_ace.html

<http://www.unmc.edu/bhecn/documents/ace-handout-ne-specific.pdf>

<http://scchildren.org/>