



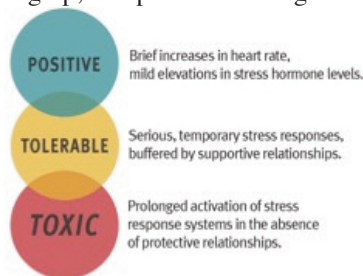
Adverse Childhood Experiences

by Kriste Simonson, School Psychologist

What does your high blood pressure have to do with your parents' divorce? Many chronic diseases of adults are determined decades earlier in childhood. NOT by disease but by childhood experiences.

BRAIN: The executive summary from the revised Wisconsin ACEs study reports that in recent years we have learned a great deal about the importance of childhood experiences to lifelong well-being. Early experiences have a broader and more profound impact than most of us would ever guess. Everyday interactions and experiences in infancy and childhood greatly influence the development of our brains and our subsequent emotional, cognitive, social, and neurobiological functioning. The brain does not come fully developed at birth, unlike other organs in the body. A person is born with almost all of the cells or neurons in their brain that they will ever have. The brain develops differently for each individual based on the experiences they have in their lives and, in particular, in the early years of a child's development. The part of the brain responsible for basic bodily functions such as heart rate, breathing, sleep, and even body temperature develops first, with higher functioning brain components coming later. Higher functioning components would be things like planning, abstract thinking, and rational thought. In short, these early experiences affect the way we view ourselves and our world, the way we learn, how we cope with life's stressors, and how we form relationships throughout our lives. Positive experiences in childhood often lead to healthy and productive adulthood. Unfortunately, negative experiences can lead to poorer mental and physical health, poorer school and work success, and lower socioeconomic status in adulthood.

STRESS: The ACEs Too High website explains that stress is the body's normal response to challenging events or environments. Stress can be positive or negative. Positive stress — the first day of school, a big exam, a sport's challenge — is part of growing up, and parents or caregivers help



children prepare for and learn how to handle positive stress, which is moderate and doesn't last long. It increases heart rate and the amount of stress hormones in the body, but they return to normal levels quickly.

But when events or the environment are threatening or harmful — we stumble across a bear in the woods — our brains instantly zap into fight, flight, or freeze mode and bypass our thinking brains, which can be way too analytical to save us (Is the bear really mean? Is it more interested in berries or killing me? Should I wait until I see it charge?). With help from caring adults, children also recover from this tolerable stress.

Too much stress — toxic stress — occurs when that bear resides inside the house. Then a child's brain and body will produce an overload of stress hormones — such as cortisol and adrenaline — that harm the function and structure of the brain. This can be particularly devastating in children whose brains are developing quickly and are very impressionable, before they are born to age three. Toxic stress is the kind of stress that can come in response to living for months or years with a screaming alcoholic father, a severely depressed and neglectful mother, or a parent who takes out life's frustrations by whipping a belt across a child's body.

WHAT IS AN ACE? An adverse childhood experience is a traumatic experience prior to the age of 18. To assess the presence of ACEs, adults are asked about the following:

- Recurrent physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
- An incarcerated household member
- A household member who was chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
- Violence between adults in the home
- Parental separation or divorce

The ACE score is a measure of cumulative exposure to adverse childhood conditions. Exposure to any single ACE condition is counted as one point; points are tallied and totaled for a final score. The ACE score does not capture the frequency or severity of any given ACE in a person's life, focusing instead on the number of ACE categories experienced.

WHAT CAN WE DO? Having high

ACEs scores does not mean a person is doomed to disease, disabilities, and social problems. Research shows that positive relationships and other interventions can counteract the negative. A good first step is just being aware. Chequamegon School District started out the school year with a 3-hour presentation on ACEs which was required by all staff to attend. The ACEs presentation was very well received by staff. The follow up evaluations had the recurring theme that staff learned about ACEs and that behavior is not always the child's fault but rather biology - based on their experiences, and many expressed increased empathy. They also indicated an interest in learning more about ACEs, specifically how to apply it in the classroom. It was recommended by the presenter that based on the evaluations the next step would be to get more training on becoming a more trauma-sensitive school. That is why we sent a team of people to attend the Trauma Informed Care two-day workshop in Superior. The people attending will share the information with our district Positive Behavior Intervention Teams with the hope that the ideas will be implemented.

Other steps have been taken to address the need for further development of trauma informed school and community. A grant has been applied for to give the CSD free access to a universal screener for emotional, behavior, and social skills that will allow us to identify students that are in need of additional interventions or services. Also it was suggested that a screening of the movie "Paper Tigers" be arranged for the community with discussion about ACEs to follow. At a recent Early Childhood countywide meeting this was brought up and both the Phillips and Park Falls public librarians and CESA staff said they would look into arranging this for the community. So watch for an announcement of a showing of "Paper Tigers" to be coming soon.

