

Understanding, Preventing, and Healing from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

By the American Society for the Positive Care of Children (SPCC)

What Are ACE's?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful experiences that can happen to any of us before we turn 18. They're not our fault, and we didn't have control over when or why they happened. They can be a single event, or an ongoing struggle where our safety, security, trust, or sense of self is threatened or violated.

The ACE's study included **ten types** of stressful or traumatic events.

Abuse ACE's Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse

Neglect ACE's Physical neglect, Emotional neglect,

Household ACE's Divorce, Incarceration, Substance abuse, Domestic violence, and Mental Illness

Nearly two out of three adults reported experiencing at least one type of ACE, and more than one in five adults reported experiencing three or more ACEs. The study found that ACEs can negatively impact physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional development, and can have lasting effects on health and well-being throughout life. These 10 ACEs are not the only kind of adversities we may face as children. **Discrimination, poverty, racism and other common experiences** can have similar impacts as ACEs.

What is toxic Stress

Stress on its own isn't a bad thing. Some stress is positive—like when taking a big test or playing an important sports game. Tolerable stress is more intense, like when experiencing a big loss or life change. As children, supportive adults, environments, and activities can buffer this stress and make it easier for us to process.

The stress response turns toxic when a challenging situation doesn't end, or we don't have enough support early in life to help us process. When our stress response stays active too long, it can hurt our body and brain and affect our behavior.

ACEs and toxic stress change how we function, not just how we feel. They are especially impactful to the brain from birth to age 3, although toxic stress can impact the brain as it continues to develop into our early 20s, and throughout our lifetime.

Toxic stress affects the way our brain and body respond to and process things. **We can become more wired for protection than for connection.** This can make it hard for us to steady our emotions and behaviors. **It can make concentrating and learning more challenging. And it can make us feel anxious and on-guard even when we're safe.**

How ACEs and Toxic Stress Can Change Us

Science shows that the higher our ACE score, the greater the odds are that we may experience health issues like cancer, diabetes, depression, stroke, and heart disease. Most of the leading causes of death are associated with ACEs. If we experienced significant adversity or trauma and toxic stress without interventions and positive support, there can be more barriers for us in school, work, or relationships, and we can experience more health conditions that may even impact how long we live. Despite the odds, many of us have found ways to feel better and live the

lives we want for ourselves - and science tells us that ACEs, childhood adversity, and the effects of toxic stress can be passed on to future generations through:

- Biology: Toxic stress can change how our brains develop and function. It can disrupt our immune, endocrine, and metabolic systems. It can disrupt our DNA, “tagging” certain high-risk genes as “on” or protective ones as “off.”
- Behavior: We can learn and pass on patterns like abuse or neglect, or coping behaviors like smoking or substance use.

Our ACE history doesn't represent the whole equation. **Positive childhood experiences—like nurturing and supportive relationships, environments, and activities—can protect us and prevent lasting harms, helping keep stress tolerable rather than toxic.** No matter what our pasts were like, we have the power to heal from the effects of toxic stress. We have the power to help prevent ACEs and support the children in our lives. **ACEs do not define who we are.** Our stories aren't fully written yet. It's up to us to decide what's in the next chapter.

For more information go to <https://americanspcc.org>