

ACEs: Adversity, Resiliency, and Health Outcomes By Michelle Rich

Brain development and trauma are often overlooked factors when considering solutions to chronic health problems such as obesity. In promoting positive health, especially for children in Mendocino County, the community needs to explore the influence of experiences such as abuse, neglect, parental mental illness and substance abuse, domestic violence, divorce, and parental incarceration. These traumatic events, or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), have health, social, and economic risk factors associated with them. And there is data to back up this claim. The Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego conducted a long-term study of patients in the Kaiser Permanente system, which has shown that adults who have more Adverse Childhood Experiences have poorer health outcomes. The data showing this association is staggering. ACEs heighten the risk not only of chronic disease such as obesity, but also of negative economic and social outcomes that affect health. Positive solutions to poor health and challenging economic conditions in Mendocino County will not be fully realized without considering the underlying influence of trauma on children.

Dr. Bruce Perry of the Child Trauma Academy, based in Houston, Texas, has spent decades treating traumatized children and studying the impacts of trauma on brain development. His basic premise is that children need “consistent, predictable, enriched, and stimulating interactions in a context of attentive and nurturing relationships” in order for the brain to develop optimally. Adverse experiences create patterns in brain development that are adaptive to the adverse conditions but maladaptive for healthful living over the long-haul. These adverse experiences change how the brain operates in ways that elevate or suppress the stress response system, impact the ability to connect with others and read emotion, and influence long-term health. In short, traumatized brains are fundamentally different than non-traumatized brains.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences that can impact early brain development are shockingly common. In the original Kaiser Permanente study, 63 percent of people experienced one category of trauma and more than 20 percent had three or more. Studies in other communities across the country have continued to demonstrate both the commonality of Adverse Childhood Experiences and the striking social stratification associated with them: ACEs disproportionately affect people of color and people with low incomes. The ACE study links the effects of social behavior with health and provides insight into how trauma continues its effect throughout a person’s life. “Without scientific data, the long-term effects of childhood trauma are otherwise easily brushed aside in favor of a more comfortable and convenient denial of the problem.” (Felitti, V., Anda, R. “ACEs and Stress: Paying the Piper.” *Ace Reporter*. Spring 2007 p. 2). In other words, it is easier to blame personal defects or behavior for what are really effects of childhood trauma on brain development. Childhood trauma affects brain development, which in turn affects health throughout life.

Though the data is compelling from the ACEs study and the work of Dr. Perry, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between chronic health and social problems and Adverse Childhood Experiences. Many children do thrive despite having profound experiences of trauma. Miraculously and mysteriously, humans have the capacity to adapt and heal. Protective factors can mitigate the full effect of childhood trauma, including:

- Parental resilience – the ability to respond to stress and adversity
- Social connections – relationships with neighbors, family, and friends
- Concrete support in times of need – having resources available when they are needed

- Knowledge of parenting and child development – understanding what is typical for children during different ages and stages
- Social and emotional competence of children – awareness of self and others

This raises an important question for the community: How do we help kids grow up with many protective factors, and how do we treat adults who are experiencing the lasting consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences? It is infinitely easier to prevent damage than to fix it, as there are no easy answers for how to help adults with trauma. Addressing the complex relationship between health and childhood experiences is a start, but at the heart of the matter is our relationship with others. Social support for parents and children is the best protection for mitigating the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Dr. Perry talks about how historically there were four caregivers for every child. Today, there is less than one.

After all, humans are social beings, and the strength of our social connections enables us to provide the best opportunity for raising happy, healthy and well-adjusted children, which translates to the best hope for a thriving future.

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