

Intergenerational *Trauma and ACEs* in Families

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)?

The term ACEs comes from a landmark 1998 public health study, the largest of its kind. The study found that childhood abuse, neglect, and other adversities before age 18 can affect health throughout life. What happens in childhood can impact physical health, mental health, and overall well-being in adulthood.

ACEs fall into three categories:

- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Neglect (physical, emotional)
- Household challenges (exposure to domestic violence, family separation, parental substance use, untreated mental health issues, or criminal behavior)

Researchers describe the relationship between ACEs and health as a "dose response effect" — the more ACEs a person experiences, the greater the risk of health and life problems.

Parents and caregivers need support, tools, and skills to help calm stress, for themselves and for their children. When caregivers can respond in safe, caring, and responsive ways, children are better able to grow, learn, and thrive.



Key Truths About ACEs

- ACEs are common across all communities.
- They often happen together.
- Experiencing three or more ACEs increases the risk of health and life challenges.
- ACEs can affect both mental and physical health, contributing to disease, disability, and shorter life expectancy.

How Stress Affects Children

When children experience ongoing stress or danger, their body's alarm system stays activated. Over time, this stress response may lead to chronic inflammation and increase the risk of health problems later in life. Children's bodies are meant to handle short bursts of stress and then recover. When children have chances to feel safe and supported, their bodies can reset, building strength and resilience.

Does stress affect all children the same?

Not all children who experience ACEs develop health or mental health problems, but early traumatic experiences such as abuse or neglect can disrupt brain development.

When young children perceive their environment as unsafe or threatening, stress levels rise and interfere with learning, emotional regulation, and development. Experiencing multiple adversities reduces opportunities to build resilience and raises the risk of poor health and life outcomes. Because young children's developing brains and bodies are especially sensitive to these effects, early support matters, it is not always best to "wait and see."

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The Impact of ACEs on Parenting

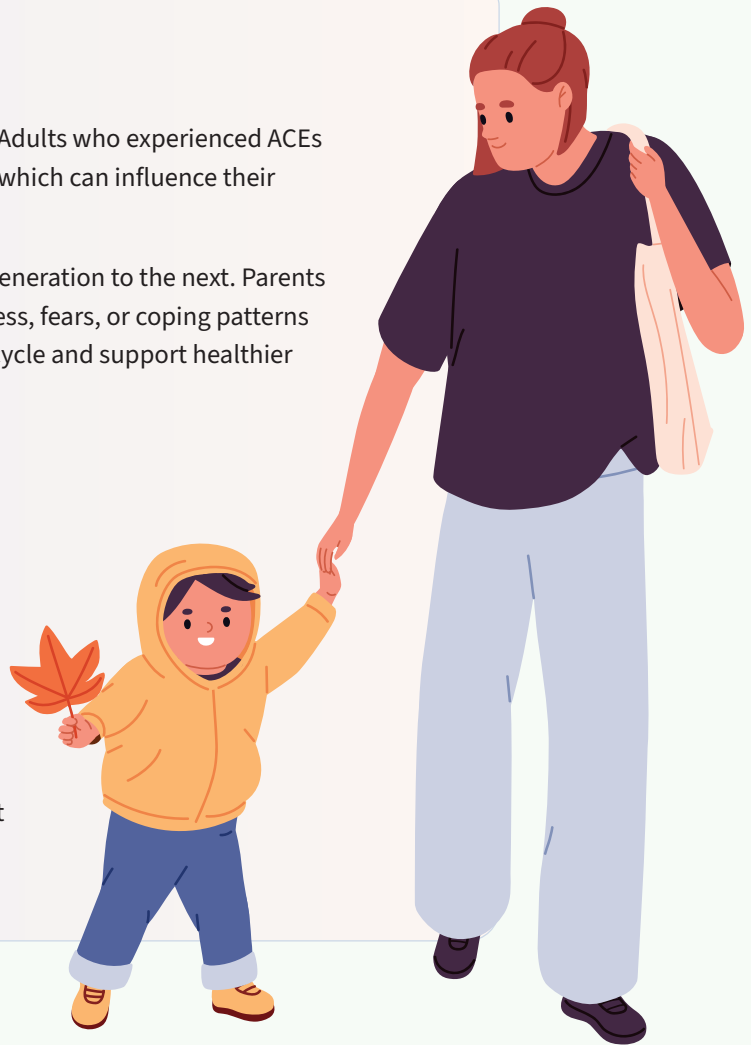
Adverse Childhood Experiences can affect both children and adults. Adults who experienced ACEs may face challenges in managing stress, emotions, or relationships, which can influence their parenting.

Intergenerational trauma is the passing of trauma effects from one generation to the next. Parents who experienced trauma in childhood may unintentionally carry stress, fears, or coping patterns into their parenting. Recognizing these patterns can help break the cycle and support healthier family dynamics.

Signs of ACEs in parenting can include:

- Difficulty managing stress or emotions.
- Overreacting or underreacting to children's behaviors.
- Trouble setting consistent routines or boundaries.
- Withdrawal from or difficulty connecting with children.
- High anxiety, fear, or overprotectiveness.
- Struggling to ask for or accept help.

Understanding the impact of ACEs and intergenerational trauma allows parents, caregivers, and professionals to provide support that promotes resilience, healthy relationships, and family well-being.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood