

Stress & Early Brain Growth

Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences

(ACEs)

What are ACEs?

ACEs are serious childhood traumas – a list is shown below – that can result in toxic stress and possible impact on healthy brain development. Intense or lengthy exposure to toxic stress may prevent a child from learning, playing, or interacting in a healthy way with other children, and can result in long-term health problems.

Adverse Childhood Experiences can include:

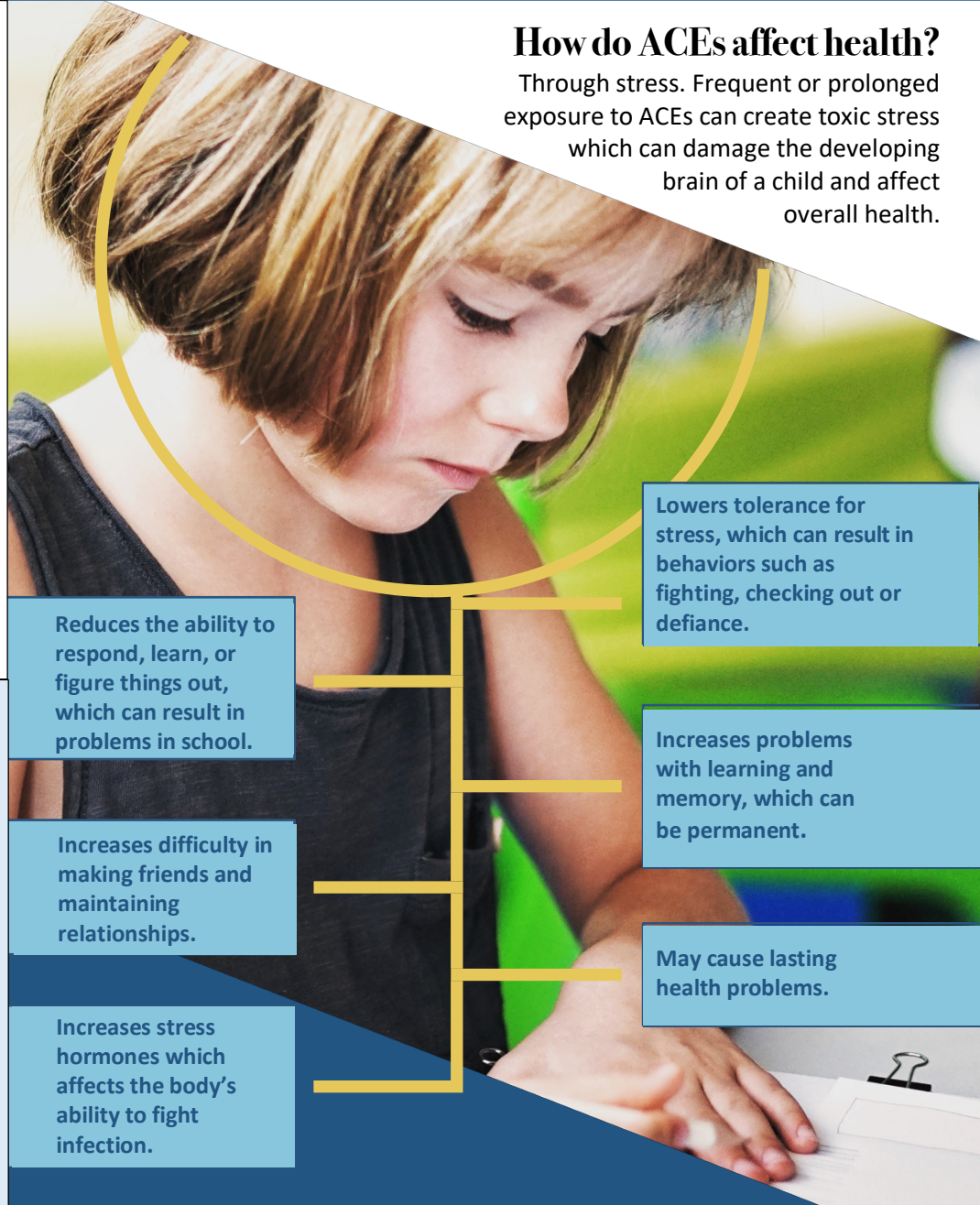
1. Emotional abuse
2. Physical abuse
3. Sexual abuse
4. Emotional neglect
5. Physical neglect
6. Witnessing a caregiver being hurt
7. Household substance abuse
8. Household mental illness
9. Parental separation or divorce
10. Incarcerated household member
11. Bullying (by another child or adult)
12. Witnessing violence outside the home
13. Witnessing a brother or sister being hurt
14. Racism, sexism, or any other form of discrimination
15. Being homeless
16. Natural disasters and war

Exposure to childhood ACEs can increase the risk of:

- Adolescent pregnancy
- Alcoholism and alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Illicit drug use
- Heart disease
- Liver disease
- Multiple sexual partners
- Intimate partner violence
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)
- Smoking
- Suicide attempts
- Unintended pregnancies

How do ACEs affect health?

Through stress. Frequent or prolonged exposure to ACEs can create toxic stress which can damage the developing brain of a child and affect overall health.



Reduces the ability to respond, learn, or figure things out, which can result in problems in school.

Increases difficulty in making friends and maintaining relationships.

Increases stress hormones which affects the body's ability to fight infection.

Lowers tolerance for stress, which can result in behaviors such as fighting, checking out or defiance.

Increases problems with learning and memory, which can be permanent.

May cause lasting health problems.

A Survival Mode Response to toxic stress increases a child's heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension. Their thinking brain is knocked off-line.

Self-protection is their priority. In other words:

"I can't hear you! I can't respond to you! I am just trying to be safe!"

The Good News

RESILIENCE CAN BRING BACK HEALTH AND HOPE!

What is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to return to being healthy and hopeful after bad things happen. Research shows that if parents provide a safe environment for their children and teach them how to be resilient, that helps reduce the effects of ACEs.



Parents, teachers and caregivers can help children by:

- Gaining an understanding of ACEs
- Helping children identify feelings and manage emotions
- Creating safe physical and emotional environments at home, in school, and in neighborhoods

BUILD RESILIENCE

What does resilience look like?

Resilience is a child's ability to grow and develop in a healthy way despite scary or dangerous things that may have happened to them.¹ Resilience focuses on a person's ability to use one's strengths while under stress, or in the midst of crisis, and to overcome and move beyond adversity or challenging situations.

If your child has had adverse experiences here are some things you can do to build their resilience.

1. Boost your child's sense of mastery. Provide children with tasks, that based on their age and skill level, can be solved with some effort. Urge your child to take part in projects that strengthen problem solving skills. Help them find meaning in tough situations and support a hopeful, positive outlook.
2. Understand that your child may need support with naming and talking about his or her feelings. Help your child practice by putting themselves in someone else's shoes. Can they name and relate to how the other person feels?
3. Identify shared family rules and values that are clear and consistent, promote physical and emotional safety, and lead to predictable routines.
4. Link your family to groups in the area that support your child's self-esteem and ability to give back to their community. Examples may be joining boy or girl scouts, volunteering at the local animal shelter, or becoming active in religious groups' community improvement projects.
5. Develop chances for your child to grow friendships with peers and trusted adults. Having close relationships with others is the single most important factor in helping a child see and achieve a positive future.

Adapted with permission from the Community & Family Services Division at the Spokane (WA) Regional Health District.

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¹ Magnus, K. B., Cowen, E. L., Wyman, P. A., Fagen, D. B., & Work, W. C. (1999). Correlates of resilient outcomes among highly stressed African-American and White urban children. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(4), 473-488.

Resources

Kansas Parent Information Resource Center
(785) 783-2975 jgroff@kpirc.org

Families Together
(800) 264-6343 topeka@families-together-inc.org

TASN School Mental Health Initiative <http://ksdetasn.org/smhi>

Kansas Technical Assistance System Network (TASN) <http://ksdetasn.org>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://nctsn.org>