

# A teacher discovers the magnitude of childhood trauma in his classroom: ACEs at Onate High School

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, and witnessing experiences like parental conflict and substance abuse, have been found to have devastating effects on the future health and prosperity of children. The Kaiser Permanente study, that first brought the problem of ACEs to light, has shown a definite dose effect where the more ACEs in a child's life, the more devastating the cumulative effects.

Children with three or more ACEs have twice the probability of cardiovascular problems and diabetes. Children with four or more ACEs are eight times more likely to become alcoholic. Children with six or more ACEs have a life expectancy 20 years less than those with less than three. The national numbers indicate that about a third of children have more than three ACEs. Some have called it the greatest public health concern we currently face. It might be more aptly described as the biggest public health crisis facing our students that no one has heard of.

A discussion of ACEs was an appropriate topic for the advanced placement (AP) psychology class I teach. Students who take AP courses are usually successful and performing well in their high school curriculum. My students are no different. It is a difficult and demanding curriculum that deals with many aspects of how we think, behave, learn, survive, and thrive. I had been introduced to the ACEs study and survey at a national legislator conference and through the book *Anna, Age Eight* written by a friend and child advocate. It seemed a good topic for AP psychology and would spur conversation on how early trauma affects later life.

Prior to administering the ten question ACEs survey, I alerted the guidance counselors. The survey and ensuing discussion could bring up difficult memories and issues for a few students who have experienced multiple ACEs. I gave each student a blank 3x5 card to complete the 10-question survey anonymously and record the number of ACEs they have experienced in their lives.

It took students about 10 minutes to complete the survey and I collected the cards. I tallied the results from the class while they watched a short video on ACEs and the adverse health effects of a high ACE score. I recall a gasp from students when the video reported a 20-year reduction in life expectancy with six or more ACEs.

The results from the first class astounded me. Of the 34 students, 22 had 3 or more ACEs and an astonishing 12 had 6 or more. Way higher than what I expected or what the national averages indicate. I was struck that 12 of my students just heard that their life expectancy was 20 years less. What do I tell them? They must have felt doomed. No wonder I'd heard that gasp. This was their life they were learning about.

The rest of the class was spent talking about the results and what it means. "ACEs are not destiny," I tried to comfort them. "Knowing your ACE score helps you to manage a different trajectory for your future." "ACEs are not your fault." "What are we going to do to prevent ACEs in the future? Most of you will be parents. How will knowledge of your ACEs score help you to parent in a positive way?" I tried to listen and let them talk while I was on the edge of tears as they told their stories. I couldn't help thinking, and these are the AP students who are doing well. How many other students are there who are not feeling any success? Maybe the results from the first class were an aberration.

Results from the second class were equally disturbing. The numbers were almost the same; 11 had less than 3 ACEs, 22 had 3 or more and 4 had 8 or more. Oh my! The results were not a fluke. Some students shared very openly the lives they live. One girl commented that everyone sees her as this great student who has everything and is doing well in AP classes and school. "I feel I'm pretending. They have no idea what my life is really like." Another student commented, "While my ACE score is 0, I have a completely different view knowing that the other students in this class don't have the same life and opportunities I have."

I asked the students if they think their other teachers know what their life is like? They replied that the other teachers have no idea what their lives are like outside of school. When I asked if they thought teachers needed a better understanding of ACEs, again they overwhelmingly said that teachers should know and understand ACEs.

It's human nature to see the world from an egocentric view. We think other people think and live lives similar to us. Giving the ACEs survey to my AP students was a shock. The trauma my students have and are experiencing was way worse than I imagined. It has changed how I think about and treat my students.

At the end of class I had students complete a 3-2-1. They indicate 3 things they learned, 2 things they found interesting, and 1 question they still have. By far the most common question from the students was, "Why haven't we done anything about this?"

They are right. We need to do something about the trauma our children are experiencing. We can prevent this trauma. We need to change how children are treated and not allow this to continue. ACEs is a public health crisis that is preventable. It is just now getting the public recognition it deserves. The time is now. It is an economic issue. It is a public health issue. It is a moral issue. We need to pull back the curtain and deal with this crisis in an open way. My students are demanding it!

*Bill Soules, Ph.D. is an educator and a New Mexican state senator living in Las Cruces, New Mexico. You may email him at [soul4283@me.com](mailto:soul4283@me.com). The book *Anna, Age Eight* may be downloaded free of charge at [www.AnnaAgeEight.org](http://www.AnnaAgeEight.org).*