

The Scientific Connection Between ACEs and Resilience

Have you ever noticed that children can learn new things easily? That is because their brains are in constant, rapid development. The human brain continues developing late into adult life, but **most brain development takes place during the first five years of life.**

Childhood brain development isn't a fixed process. How a child's brain develops depends on their experiences. Providing a wide variety of experiences for a child at an early age, including appropriate challenges, will help their brains develop better. **It is possible to "rewire" the brain at any age, but it is easiest in childhood.**

Deeper, long-lasting connections are made when a particular experience happens over and over whether the experience is positive or negative. The younger a child is when they have an experience, the larger the area of the brain designated to process those experiences. For example, a child who learns musical instruments at an early age will have a larger area of their brain devoted to playing that instrument than someone who starts playing

as a teenager, even if the teen spends more time practicing.

Studies about brain development in kids show that enriching experiences can support positive brain development, but adverse experiences can negatively affect it, and lead to long term health problems. Fortunately, there is a way that children and even adults can heal from tough times, and that is where **resilience** comes in.

How the body handles stress is similar to how the body handles sickness. When you get a cold, the immune system gets stronger so that the next time it encounters similar germs it can attack them faster, and you're less likely to get sick. Continual exposure to sickness can make it harder for the body to recover.

Similarly, **some amount of stress can build resilience**, but if the stress becomes unmanageable it can be toxic and lead to poor health. Greater resilience allows individuals to handle more stress, which builds even more resilience and supports better health. Anyone can learn simple skills and tools to deal with stress as part of becoming more resilient.

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS ARE VITAL TO BREAKING THE CYCLE

80% of brain growth happens in the first three years of life, and a child's brain develops best through social interaction.

Research shows that supportive relationships increase a person's ability to thrive and allow for normal, healthy brain development.

Healthy brain development establishes a good foundation for future health, intellect, and resilience, allowing a child to reach their full potential.

Healthy brains are better able to form caring relationships.

Caring relationships connect a community. Better connected communities have lower levels of crime, violence and trauma, and community members have a better sense of well-being.

Communities can promote healthy brain development through building relationships.

A community built on caring relationships protects children from the effects of tough times.

CONNECTION

Between ACEs and Resilience

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is how well an individual or group can withstand and recover from significant changes that threaten their stability, capability, or development.

WHAT ARE ACEs?

ACEs are defined as ongoing traumatic events that occur during childhood—everything from abuse or neglect, to growing up with a family member who is incarcerated in the household. ACEs cause toxic stress, which can affect a child's brain development.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Resilience is a major factor in the growth and development of children and adolescents. Building strong resilience counters the harmful health effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).



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TYPES OF ACEs

NEGLECT

- Emotional
- Physical

ABUSE

- Physical
- Sexual
- Emotional

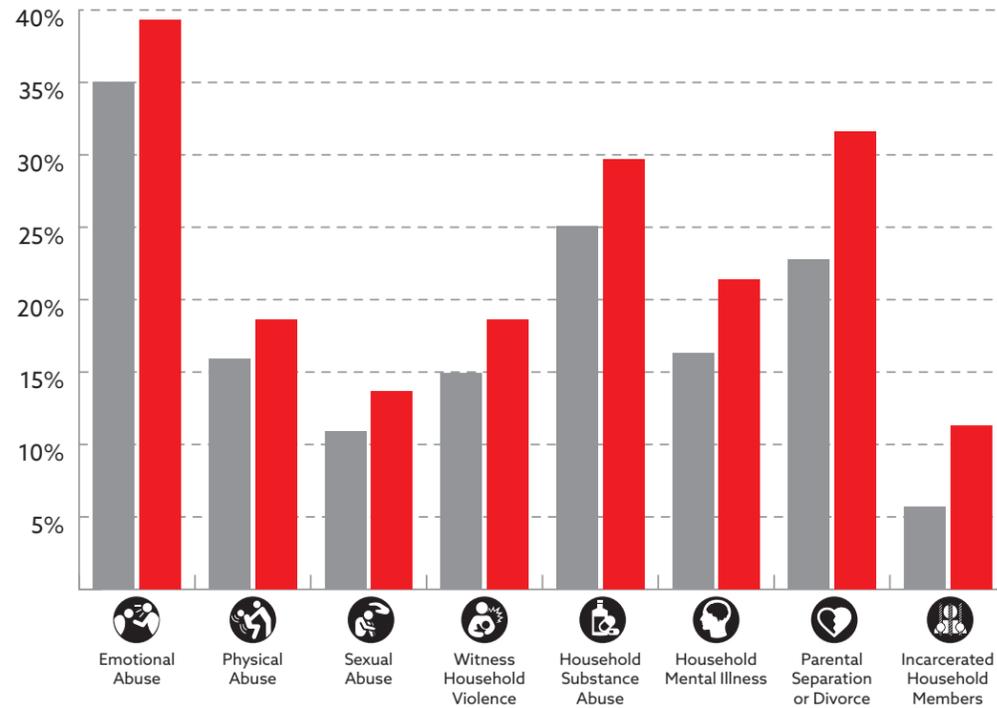
HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- Household Substance Abuse
- Incarcerated Household Member
- Parental Divorce
- Household Mental Illness
- Witness Household Violence

The most important thing a parent or caregiver can do to build resilience in a child is form a genuine, loving relationship with them. Children depend on these as well as the everyday stresses that all families encounter. People need to remember that in order to take care of children they must first take care of themselves. Adults need caring relationships to thrive as well, and relationships give people with a history of trauma an opportunity to heal.

PERCENTAGE OF ALASKA ADULTS' ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES COMPARED TO A TEN STATE SAMPLE

Alaska
Ten-State Sample



SOURCES: 2013-2015 Alaska BRFSS, Section of Chronic Disease and Prevention, Alaska Division of Public Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey ACE Module Data, 2010.

Facts and Figures

OVER 64% OF ALASKAN ADULTS have had one or more adverse childhood experiences.

When comparing Alaska to average results from ten states, a greater percentage of adult Alaskans have had every type of adverse childhood experience (ACE) that was surveyed.

ACEs are typically passed down from generation to generation. A child of a parent who has experienced tough times is more likely to face tough times themselves.

People all deal with tough times differently depending on their experiences, relationships, and community. Experiencing too much trauma without relief can change the brain and body, leading to poor health and social outcomes.

Children ages 0-5 are especially affected by tough times as their brain is going through rapid development. The good news is they can also rapidly learn how to handle tough times when they have the example of a caring, supportive adult. Brains continue to develop throughout life, so everyone can learn new skills to handle tough times.

Andy is a healthy 3-year-old who just started preschool two weeks ago. Before preschool Andy's favorite activity was playing out in the back yard. They loved learning the plants and playing with the family dog. But ever since starting preschool, Andy has wanted to stay inside with you, their caregiver, and gets anxious and cries every time you leave their side. Andy started sucking their thumb again when you thought they had outgrown that habit months ago.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The most important thing a caregiver can do to build resilience in a child is form a genuine, loving relationship with them. In Andy's case, there are many ways to respond to this uncharacteristic behavior. Here are some examples of ways to build Andy's resilience in this situation:

GIVE ATTENTION, AFFECTION, AND COMFORT. This will help Andy feel safe and loved. If you start to get frustrated with Andy, stay silent and count to ten, try to regain your calm. Once you are calm, show Andy some affection and make sure they know they are loved. Many children don't yet have the ability to explain their fears and anxieties in words, but when they are comforted they will not feel alone with their big, scary feelings. Andy will feel closer to you, and will learn healthy ways to find comfort. This will create a safe, loving environment for Andy to always return to.

VALIDATE FEELINGS. Help Andy identify their feelings (happy, sad, mad, scared). Really listen to them with interest so that Andy knows what they have to say is important. Let Andy know that whatever they are feeling is normal, and that other people have these feelings too. This will help them feel understood and give them confidence to talk to you about their feelings in the future.

PLAY WITH THEM. Playing together creates a strong bond, teaches good socializing skills, and is fun! It is also an opportunity to learn more about the way your child sees the world.

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL. Children are more likely to imitate your actions and words than to follow spoken advice. When you are with your child, act and speak in a way that you want them to act and speak. Handle difficult situations with in the same way you want your children to handle them - show understanding and compassion, take deep breaths when you're stressed, keep your emotions under control, and stay positive.

