

Understanding Trauma and Spreading Hope:

A Primer on Adverse Childhood
Experiences (ACEs)

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Introduction

What's the Story?

Do you ever catch yourself judging other people's behaviors? Do you shake your head when a parent screams profanity at an already crying child? Or wonder aloud when you read about yet another teen caught using drugs or alcohol while skipping school? Or ask "Why can't my co-worker ever get to work on time?" Unfortunately, it's common for us to judge these situations when we don't know the whole story or understand the context.

Our typical reaction is, "What's wrong with that person?" because it's hard to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. However, when we witness these behaviors and don't know the whole story, it's important to recognize that surface behaviors could be the result of something deeper and unseen.

As Joe Foderara, LCSW, BCD, challenges us, we should change the question to, "What happened to that person?" or "What is going on in their life?" because these troubling behaviors could be the result of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).



What Are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

“Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), also known as childhood trauma, are events or series of events that involve a threat to one’s physical or emotional well-being, or are overwhelming, deeply distressing, alarming, fearful, or terrorizing. It leaves one feeling helpless; changes the way a person understands him or herself, others and the world; and changes one’s neurological landscape.”
-Pottstown Trauma Informed Community Connection website

10 ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACEs)

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Family member with mental illness
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Parent with drug/alcohol addiction
- One or more parents incarcerated
- Parental separation or divorce

10 Identified ACEs

From the groundbreaking CDC-Kaiser-Permanente study on ACEs, there are 10 identified ACEs that fall into three broad categories (Abuse, Neglect and Household Dysfunction). Physical abuse can involve physical, emotional or sexual trauma, with 28.3% in the study recording physical abuse as the most common ACE experienced personally.

Physical and emotional neglect are no less damaging than physical abuse, and involve the failure of a parent or caregiver to provide for a child’s basic needs. These include things like food, shelter, supervision, medical or mental health treatment, and regular or special education needs. Neglect also includes ignoring a child’s emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs.

Household dysfunction involves the final five identified ACEs, including a family member who is mentally ill/suicidal, witnessing/experiencing domestic violence, a parent with a drug/alcohol addiction, one or more parents in jail, and parental separation or divorce. It is obvious that these factors would create chaos in a home. While there are 10 identified ACEs in the initial study, there are other ACEs that can contribute to toxic stress, such as neighborhood violence, living in foster care, bullying, and experiencing racism or discrimination.

When people hear the word “trauma,” they tend to think of physical abuse first, but it’s crucial to realize that ACEs include the emotional trauma of observing domestic violence or being subject to dysfunctional parenting. Regardless of the duration or particular experience of trauma, ACEs have been linked to both short-term and life-long physical, psychological and behavioral outcomes in a person when they go unresolved.



**There is
HOPE.**

How Serious Are ACEs?

ACEs can add up. Each identified ACE is linked to “one count” as professionals tabulate the impact of ACEs. For people with an ACE score higher than 4, there is a higher risk of exhibiting negative long-term physical health outcomes like smoking, alcoholism, emphysema, chronic bronchitis and suicide. With an ACE score higher than 6, a person could be at risk of dying 20 years earlier than they would otherwise.

ACEs can have a domino effect: what occurs in one person’s life can easily expand to affect a family, friends and the public. And trauma happens to individuals in all walks of life—regardless of family income, location, education, etc. There is even evidence that ACEs are to blame for a large percentage of workplace absenteeism, and for rising costs in healthcare, emergency response, mental health and criminal justice.

Understanding ACEs not only improves our understanding of people’s behaviors. It can also help those who have suffered ACEs realize why they react to certain situations in such strong and negative ways. It is our hope that this awareness around the impact of trauma leads to interventions and treatments that can lead to resolution, healing and overall well-being.

Of the original
17,000
ACE study
participants,
64%
reported at least
1 ACE.

• ACEs DON'T OCCUR ALONE : If you have one, there's an **87% CHANCE** that you have two or more.

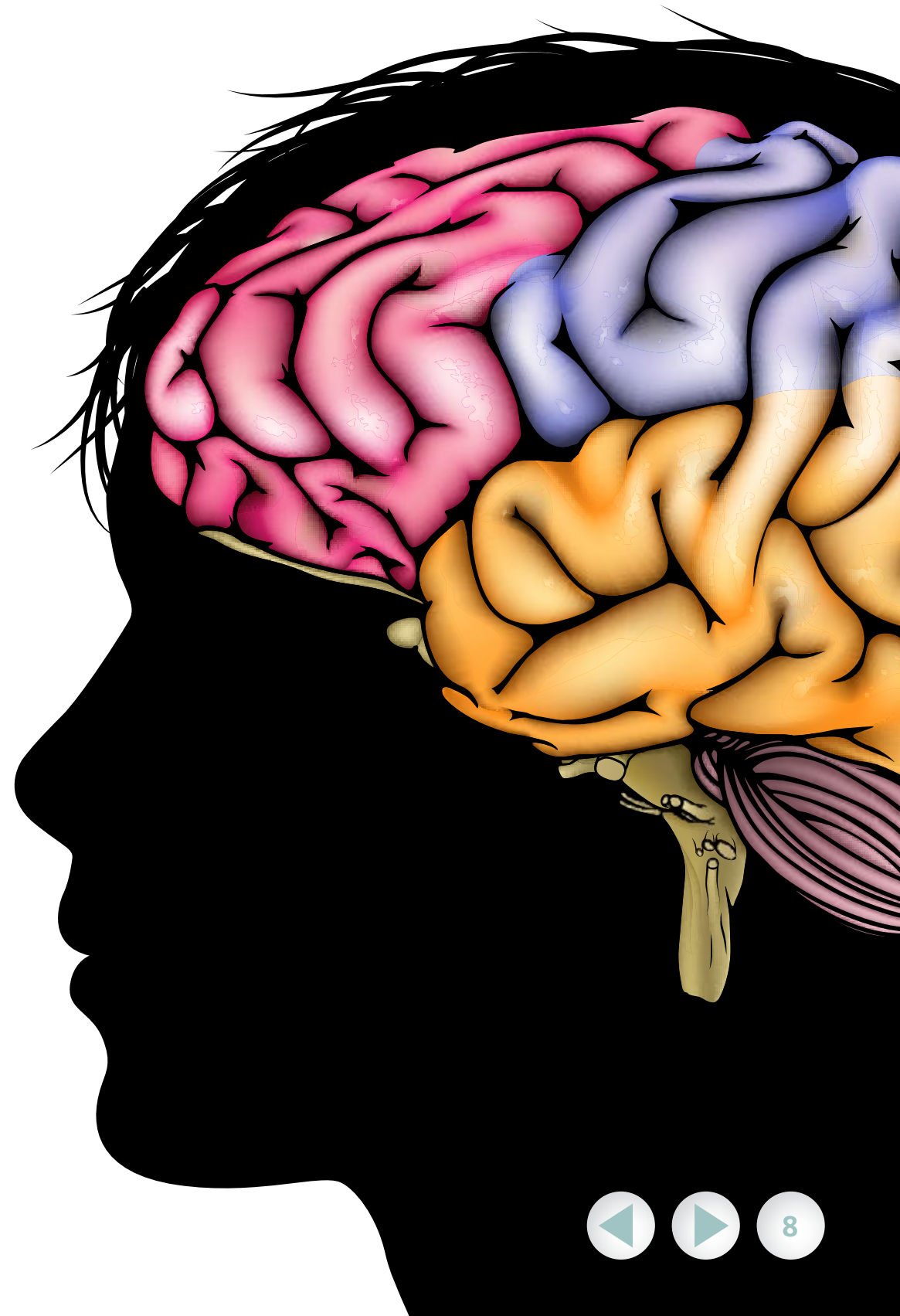
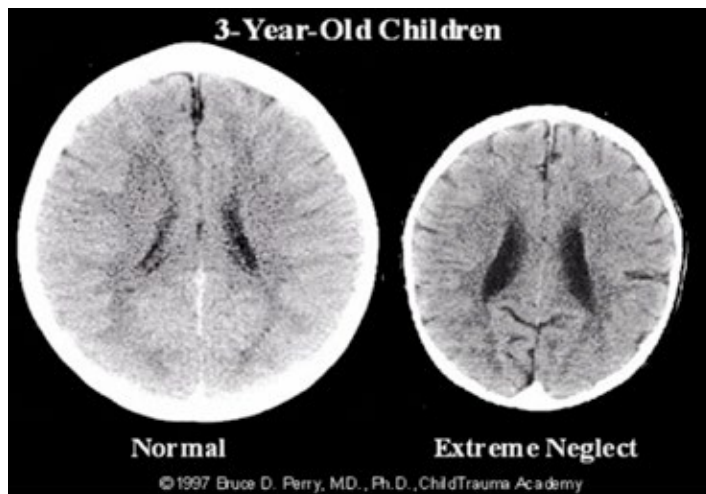
**The more ACEs you have,
the greater the risk**
for chronic disease, mental illness, violence and
being a victim of violence.

The Possible Outcomes of ACEs

ACEs and the Human Body

During childhood, everything from a pop quiz to a skinned knee places stress on a child's brain. But so does learning how to ride a bike, which is a good thing. The human mind is built to deal with both good and bad stressors.

However, a child who has experienced or is currently living through a traumatic situation could face a toxic level of stress they just aren't equipped to handle. If that overwhelming trauma continues for months or years, the child's brain could overproduce stress hormones, disrupting brain development and other organ systems (such as the nervous, endocrine, cardiovascular, reproductive and immune systems). In turn, the child has an increased risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment. ACEs can even cause genes in the body to turn on and off.



Possible Signs/Outcomes of ACEs in Children

There are many possible signs that can appear when ACEs are a part of a child's life. Every child is different and has varying levels of coping mechanisms and resilience.

Possible physical, psychological and behavioral signs of ACEs include:



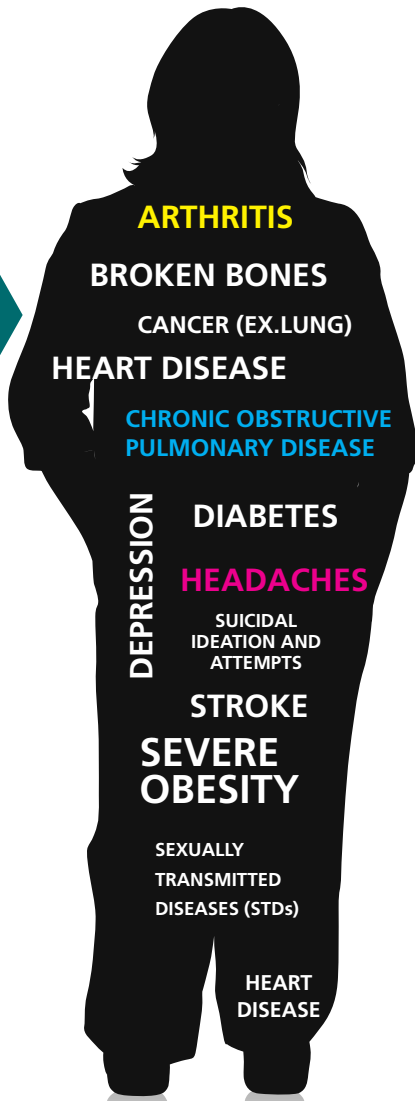
Possible Physical and Psychological Signs and Outcomes of ACEs in Adults

If left untreated and unaddressed, the effects don't stop in childhood. Left unresolved, ACEs can lead to a wide range of physical and psychological outcomes over the course of a lifetime.

Possible Behavioral Signs/ Outcomes of ACEs in Adults

The outcomes of an ACE/ACEs are not only physical and psychological. The graphic below covers some of the possible behavioral outcomes an adult could exhibit as a result of an ACE/ACEs.

Possible physical and psychological outcomes in adults include:



Possible behavioral signs/ outcomes in adults include:



MARISSA'S STORY. BREAKING THE CYCLE.

A Cycle of ACEs

Some of the possible outcomes of untreated childhood trauma mirror ACEs themselves. This is a cyclical problem when left unaddressed. For example, physical abuse is an ACE, with violence as a possible behavioral outcome in adults. Likewise, one ACE is living with the chaos and undependability of a parent who is addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, which falls under household dysfunction, with drug use as a possible behavioral outcome for children and adults who have experienced childhood trauma.

This is how unresolved ACEs create generational cycles and the cross-community ripple effect of toxic stress. For adults who recognize a pattern of ACEs, a collection of resources is available at pottstownmatters.org/community-connection-resources, including the Montgomery County Parent and Infant Resource Guide.

Addressing ACEs

One Caring Adult

Research shows that one caring and committed adult in the life of a child can change the course of that child's entire life.

WHY IS THIS TRUE?

“These relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption. They also build key capacities—such as the ability to plan, monitor and regulate behavior—that enable children to respond adaptively to adversity and thrive.”

*John Shonkoff, MD, Harvard Center
for the Developing Child*

Through this caring connection, a child can develop trust which is followed by behaviors that lead to resilience.





Building Resilience

Now that you have learned more about the impact of ACEs on a child's development, you can play a part in creating relationships and spaces where resilience is fostered. One of the most effective ways for children to combat ACEs is through resilience. This means they are able to "bounce back" and overcome adversity and trauma.

A resilient child typically has the ability to cope with stress and regulate their emotions. Added to that is often an understanding that failing can be a learning experience. Resilience includes asking for help, developing trusting relationships, forming a positive outlook in the face of challenges, and expressing feelings in healthy ways.

The PTICC website has tools for parents and teachers at <http://pottstownmatters.org/building-resilience/>.

Be sure to also check out The Flourishing Child webisode series on YouTube:

Part 1: [An overview of PTICC](#)

Part 2: [Protective Factors Across Childhood](#)

Part 3: [Relationships and Play in Early Childhood](#)

Part 4: [Social and Emotional Learning](#)



Building Resilience

Connection Matters, Building Resilience



Resilience is the ability to overcome adversity and bounce back ...stronger than before.

Why does resilience matter?

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.

John Shonkoff, MD Harvard Center for the Developing Child

Add in positive experiences and coping skills, and we are on our

Getting Involved

Getting Involved

Want to get involved? There are opportunities right here in the Pottstown community.

PTICC

The community members who make up Pottstown Trauma Informed Community Connection (PTICC) advocate for a culture of safety, understanding and responsiveness to ACEs. They work to bring about awareness of ACEs and what we can do through community meetings, education, and training opportunities and resources to help those interested in changing how we look at anyone impacted by ACEs, possibly including ourselves.

From their website:

Together we can...

- make Pottstown an even better place to form strong connections, experience belonging, put down roots and blossom.
- recognize, respond to and reduce the struggles that kids and adults face every day. That's what the Pottstown Trauma Informed Community Connection is all about! Join Us!



Advocating for best practices in public programs and treatments for mental illnesses can also contribute to ACE prevention. Vetoviolence.cdc.gov, a violence prevention resource created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recommends advocating for the following in a community:

- Home visiting to pregnant women and families with newborns
- Parenting training programs
- Parent support programs for teens and teen pregnancy prevention programs
- Mental illness and substance abuse treatment
- Intimate partner violence prevention
- High-quality child care
- Social support for parents
- Sufficient income support for lower-income families



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If you have questions about dealing with ACEs, contact Creative Health Services at 484-941-0500 or info@creativehs.org.

Special thank you to Kirsten Freitag Murray, Director of Development and Public Relations at Creative Health Services, for consulting on this ebook.



About The Foundation

The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation's (PAHWF) mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation. Discover Pottstown area's online community, [Mission Healthy Living](#), an initiative of PAHWF, to learn and share great information on how to lead a healthier life.

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