

Understanding Trauma and ACEs

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

The Youth Success Movement

Introduction

As parents and caregivers, we all want our children to thrive. We want them to succeed in school, build healthy relationships, and grow into confident, capable adults. But sometimes, children face challenges that can impact their ability to learn, grow, and reach their full potential.

This guide is designed to help you understand trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and—most importantly—to show you that you have the power to help your child heal and build resilience. You don't need to be a perfect parent or have all the answers. The single most important thing you can provide is your loving, consistent presence.

What Are ACEs and Trauma?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are specific types of stressful or traumatic events that happen to children before they turn 18. Researchers have identified 10 main categories of ACEs, which fall into three groups:

Category	Examples
Abuse	Physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse
Neglect	Physical neglect (lack of basic needs) or emotional neglect (lack of emotional support)
Household Challenges	Domestic violence, substance abuse in the home, mental illness in the family, parental separation/divorce, or incarceration of a family member

Understanding Trauma

While ACEs describe the events that happen, trauma describes how a child's mind and body respond to those events. Trauma is the lasting emotional and physical impact of stressful experiences.

Here's an important distinction: ACEs are the events, and trauma is the response. Not every child who experiences an ACE will develop trauma, especially if they have strong support systems and caring adults in their lives. This is where you, as a parent or caregiver, make all the difference.

KEY POINT: More than 60% of adults have experienced at least one ACE. You are not alone, and there is no shame in what you or your child have experienced. What matters most is what we do moving forward.

Why Trauma and ACEs Matter for Your Child

Understanding trauma isn't about dwelling on the past or assigning blame. It's about understanding how experiences shape a child's brain and behavior so we can help them heal and thrive.

Impact on Brain Development

When children experience ongoing stress—what experts call 'toxic stress'—their developing brains can be affected in significant ways:

- The brain stays in 'survival mode,' constantly watching for threats
- High levels of stress hormones (like cortisol) can physically change how the brain develops
- The parts of the brain responsible for memory, attention, and planning can be affected
- Emotional regulation—the ability to manage big feelings—can become more difficult

Impact on Learning and School Success

Because trauma affects how the brain works, it can directly impact a child's ability to succeed in school:

- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention in class
- Problems remembering information or following multi-step directions
- Trouble solving problems or thinking flexibly
- Challenges with reading social cues or getting along with peers
- Difficulty managing emotions, leading to outbursts or withdrawal

IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER: When a child is 'acting out' or 'shutting down,' they're not trying to be difficult. Their brain is reacting to what it perceives as a threat. Behavior is communication—it's telling us that a child needs help, not punishment.

Recognizing Signs of Trauma in Children

Every child is different, and trauma can show up in many different ways. Some children become more active or aggressive, while others withdraw and become quiet. Here are some common signs to watch for:

Emotional and Behavioral Signs

- Increased anxiety, worry, or fearfulness
- Frequent crying or sadness
- Anger, irritability, or aggressive behavior

- Withdrawal from family, friends, or activities they used to enjoy
- Difficulty trusting others or forming relationships
- Extreme reactions to small problems
- Seeming numb or disconnected from emotions

Physical Signs

- Frequent headaches or stomachaches with no clear medical cause
- Changes in sleep patterns (nightmares, difficulty falling asleep, sleeping too much or too little)
- Changes in eating habits (eating much more or less than usual)
- Regression to earlier behaviors (bedwetting, thumb-sucking in older children)
- Always being 'on alert' or jumpy

School and Learning Signs

- Sudden drop in grades or academic performance
- Difficulty concentrating or completing assignments
- Problems with memory or following instructions
- School refusal or frequent absences
- Conflicts with teachers or peers
- Difficulty transitioning between activities or handling changes in routine

NOTE: Many of these signs can also be part of normal child development or may indicate other issues. If you notice several of these signs persisting over time, or if they interfere with your child's daily life, it may be helpful to talk with a pediatrician, school counselor, or mental health professional.

How You Can Help Your Child Heal and Build Resilience

The good news—and this is truly powerful—is that you don't need to be a perfect parent or a trained therapist to help your child heal. Research consistently shows that the single most important factor in a child's resilience is having at least one stable, caring adult in their life. That adult can be you.

1. Build a Warm, Secure Relationship

A strong, loving relationship is the foundation of healing. Here's how to strengthen your connection:

- Spend quality one-on-one time together regularly, even if it's just 10-15 minutes a day
- Show physical affection (hugs, pats on the back) if your child is comfortable with it

- Listen without judgment when your child wants to talk
- Express your love and appreciation verbally and often
- Be present and engaged—put away phones and distractions during family time
- Share family meals together as often as possible

2. Create Predictable Routines and Structure

When a child has experienced trauma, the world can feel unpredictable and unsafe. Consistent routines help calm their nervous system by showing them what to expect:

- Establish regular times for waking up, meals, homework, and bedtime
- Create morning and bedtime routines that are the same each day
- Give advance notice before transitions ('In 5 minutes, we'll clean up for dinner')
- Use visual schedules or calendars to help children know what's coming
- Try to maintain routines even during weekends and vacations
- When changes are necessary, prepare your child ahead of time and explain what will happen

3. Practice Co-Regulation

Co-regulation means using your calm to help your child become calm. Children learn to manage their emotions by 'borrowing' our calmness when they're upset:

- When your child is upset, stay calm yourself (take deep breaths, speak softly)
- Get down to your child's eye level and offer a gentle presence
- Validate their feelings: 'I can see you're really angry right now. That's okay.'
- Offer comfort without trying to immediately 'fix' the problem
- Model healthy ways to express and manage emotions
- After the storm passes, talk about what happened and brainstorm solutions together

4. Give Your Child Choices and Control

Trauma often involves a loss of control. Giving children appropriate choices helps restore their sense of agency and empowerment:

- Offer two acceptable options: 'Do you want to do homework before or after snack?'
- Let children make age-appropriate decisions about their clothes, activities, or food
- Ask for their input on family decisions when possible
- Respect their 'no' when it's safe to do so
- Acknowledge their preferences and opinions, even when you can't accommodate them
- Explain the reasons behind rules and limits

5. Create a Safe, Calm Home Environment

Your home should be a place where your child can relax and feel safe:

- Minimize chaos and loud noises when possible
- Create a special calm-down space with soft items, books, or quiet activities
- Limit exposure to violent or scary media (TV, movies, video games, news)
- Address conflicts between adults away from children when possible
- Make sure your child has a comfortable, private space of their own
- Use gentle discipline focused on teaching rather than punishment

6. Encourage Healthy Coping Skills

Help your child develop a 'toolbox' of healthy ways to manage stress and big emotions:

- Physical activity: running, dancing, jumping, sports
- Creative expression: drawing, painting, music, writing
- Deep breathing exercises or simple meditation
- Time in nature or with pets
- Talking about feelings with trusted people
- Reading, listening to music, or other calming activities

7. Take Care of Yourself

You cannot pour from an empty cup. Taking care of yourself isn't selfish—it's essential:

- Acknowledge your own stress and emotions
- Seek support from friends, family, or support groups
- Take breaks when you can—even 5 minutes of quiet can help
- Consider therapy or counseling if you're struggling or have your own trauma history
- Practice self-compassion—you're doing your best in a challenging situation
- Maintain your own healthy habits (sleep, nutrition, exercise) when possible

REMEMBER: Healing from trauma is not a straight line. Your child may have good days and difficult days. Progress may be slow and sometimes it may feel like you're going backward. This is normal. What matters is your consistent, loving presence through all of it.

When Parents Have Experienced Trauma

Many parents have their own history of trauma or ACEs. This is incredibly common—remember, more than 60% of adults have experienced at least one ACE. Your past experiences don't make you a bad parent, but being aware of how they might affect your parenting can be helpful.

How Your History Might Show Up

- Feeling triggered by your child's behavior, especially during conflicts or emotional outbursts
- Difficulty regulating your own emotions during stressful parenting moments
- Being overly protective or hypervigilant about your child's safety
- Struggling to set consistent boundaries or follow through with discipline
- Difficulty forming close emotional bonds or showing affection
- Repeating patterns from your own childhood, even when you don't want to

Breaking the Cycle

Recognizing these patterns is the first step toward change. Here are ways to break the cycle:

- Seek professional support through therapy or counseling—this is a sign of strength, not weakness
- Join a parent support group to connect with others facing similar challenges
- Practice self-awareness: notice your triggers and emotional reactions
- Learn about trauma and its effects—understanding helps you respond differently
- Practice self-compassion: you're breaking generational patterns, which takes courage
- Take time-outs when you feel overwhelmed—it's okay to step away and calm down
- Consider trauma-focused therapy approaches like EMDR or cognitive-behavioral therapy

A POWERFUL TRUTH: By addressing your own trauma and working to heal, you're not only helping yourself—you're directly helping your child succeed. Your healing becomes their healing. Every step you take to break the cycle creates a better future for your family.

The Power of a Supportive Village

There's an African proverb that says, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' This is especially true for children who have experienced trauma. No parent can or should do this alone.

Building Your Child's Support Network

A strong support network helps share the load and provides your child with multiple caring adults and positive influences:

- Extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins)
- Teachers and school counselors who understand trauma-informed practices
- Coaches, mentors, and activity leaders
- Friends' parents and neighbors
- Faith community members (if applicable)
- Mental health professionals (therapists, counselors)
- Support groups for children who have experienced similar challenges

Communicating with School

Your child's teachers and school staff can be important allies. Consider:

- Sharing relevant information about your child's needs (you don't need to share private details)
- Asking about trauma-informed practices or classroom accommodations
- Working together to create consistent expectations between home and school
- Requesting regular check-ins to monitor progress and address concerns early
- Asking if the school has counseling services or support groups available
- Exploring whether your child might benefit from an IEP or 504 plan for additional support

When to Seek Professional Help

While parents are powerful healers, sometimes professional support is needed. Consider reaching out to a mental health professional if:

- Your child's symptoms are severe or getting worse over time
- Trauma symptoms interfere with daily functioning (school, friendships, family life)
- Your child talks about wanting to hurt themselves or others
- You feel overwhelmed and don't know how to help
- Your family is experiencing a current crisis or major stressor
- You want to address your own trauma history to be a better parent

Look for therapists who specialize in trauma and have experience working with children. Effective approaches include Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and play therapy for younger children.

Hope, Healing, and Resilience

If there's one message to take away from this guide, it's this: trauma does not have to define your child's future. While ACEs and trauma can create challenges, they do not predestine children to poor outcomes.

What the Research Shows

- Children are incredibly resilient, especially when they have supportive relationships
- The brain can heal and change throughout childhood and even into adulthood (neuroplasticity)
- Most children who experience ACEs can recover when they have the right support
- Your warm, consistent presence is scientifically proven to be the most powerful protective factor
- Small, consistent actions over time create lasting change—you don't have to be perfect
- It's never too late to make a positive difference in your child's life

Building Resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. You can actively help your child build resilience by:

- Helping them develop problem-solving skills
- Encouraging positive friendships and social connections
- Supporting their interests and helping them discover their strengths
- Teaching them that mistakes are opportunities to learn, not failures
- Modeling resilience by showing how you handle challenges
- Celebrating small victories and progress
- Maintaining hope and optimism about the future

YOUR POWER AS A PARENT: You have more power than you may realize. Your love, your presence, your consistency—these are the building blocks of your child's healing and success. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to be present, caring, and committed. And you already are.

Helpful Resources

Recommended Videos

The Hand Model of the Brain by Dr. Dan Siegel: This short video uses your hand to explain why kids (and adults!) 'flip their lids' during stress and how we can help them calm down. Search for 'Dr. Dan Siegel hand model brain' on YouTube.

CDC's 'Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences' video: A clear, accessible overview of ACEs and why they matter. Available on the CDC website and YouTube.

Websites and Organizations

Organization	Website/Information
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	www.cdc.gov/aces - Comprehensive information about ACEs
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network	www.nctsn.org - Resources for parents and professionals
Child Mind Institute	www.childmind.org - Articles and guides on child mental health and trauma
Child Trends	www.childtrends.org - Research on ACEs and child development
Zero to Three	www.zerotothree.org - Resources for parents of babies and toddlers

Finding Professional Support

If you're looking for a trauma-informed therapist:

- Ask your pediatrician for recommendations
- Contact your insurance company for in-network providers
- Search the National Child Traumatic Stress Network therapist directory
- Ask your child's school counselor for local resources
- Contact local community mental health centers
- Look for therapists trained in TF-CBT, EMDR, or play therapy

Final Words

Thank you for taking the time to learn about trauma and ACEs. By reading this guide, you've already taken an important step toward supporting your child's success and well-being.

Remember that healing takes time. Be patient with your child and with yourself. Celebrate the small victories. Reach out for support when you need it. And know that your love and commitment make a profound difference in your child's life.

Together—as parents, caregivers, teachers, and community members—we can create the village our children need to heal, thrive, and succeed.

The Youth Success Movement

Building Villages to Help Children Succeed