
The Youth Success Movement

Understanding Trauma and ACEs

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Building villages to help children succeed.



You don't need to be a perfect parent. The single most important thing you can give your child is your loving, consistent presence.

That is where healing begins.

— For every parent reading this
You are already doing the most important work.

What Are ACEs?

Adverse Childhood Experiences are stressful events that happen before age 18. Researchers group them into three categories.

Abuse

Physical abuse

Emotional abuse

Sexual abuse

Neglect

Physical neglect (basic needs unmet)

Emotional neglect (lack of support)

Household Challenges

Domestic violence

Substance abuse at home

Mental illness in family

Separation / divorce

Incarceration of family member

THE EVENT

ACEs

The stressful or harmful experiences a child lives through.

e.g., a parent's incarceration

THE RESPONSE

Trauma

How a child's mind and body carry that experience afterward.

e.g., constant worry, trouble sleeping

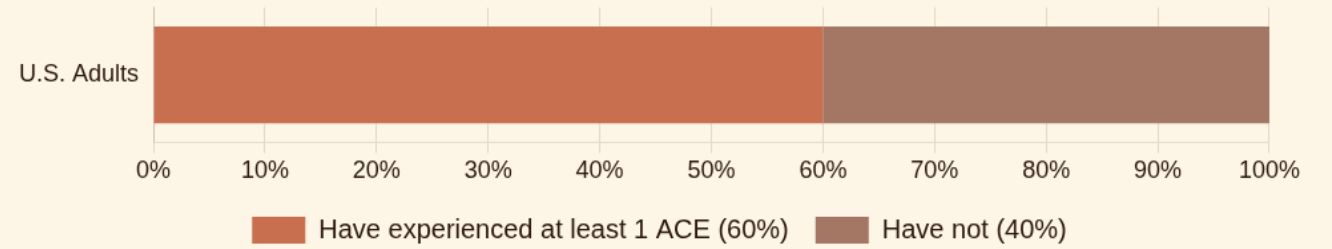
Not every child who experiences an ACE develops trauma — caring adults change everything.

You Are Not Alone

60%+

of adults have experienced at least one ACE.

You are not alone. There is no shame in what you or your child have lived through.



More than 6 in 10 adults — including many of the strongest parents you know.

CDC, Adverse Childhood Experiences Study



02 · Why It Matters

How toxic stress shapes a child's brain

- 01** The brain stays on alert — always scanning for threats.
- 02** Stress hormones change how key brain areas grow.
- 03** Memory, focus, and planning become harder.
- 04** Managing big emotions takes much more effort.

Behavior is communication. A child acting out isn't being difficult — their brain is asking for help, not punishment.

Recognizing the signs

Trauma shows up differently in every child. Some get louder, some get quieter. Here's what to look for.

Emotional & Behavioral

Anxiety, worry, fearfulness

Anger, irritability, aggression

Withdrawal from people they love

Trouble trusting or connecting

Physical

Frequent headaches or stomachaches

Sleep changes or nightmares

Eating much more or much less

Always jumpy or on edge

School & Learning

Sudden drop in grades

Trouble focusing or remembering

Refusing school or missing days

Conflicts with teachers or peers



THE GOOD NEWS

One steady, caring adult changes everything.

Research is clear: the single biggest factor in a child's resilience is one stable, loving adult. That adult can be you.

Seven ways to help your child heal

Simple, consistent practices — no perfection required.

07

Practices for healing

01

Warm, secure relationship

Daily one-on-one time. Listen without judgment.

02

Predictable routines

Same wake, meal, and bedtime rhythms.

03

Co-regulation

Use your calm to help them find theirs.

04

Choices and control

Offer two good options. Restore agency.

05

Safe, calm home

Lower the volume. Create a calm-down space.

06

Healthy coping skills

Movement, art, breath, nature, talking.

07

Care for yourself

You can't pour from an empty cup.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

03

Co-regulation

Using your calm to help your child find theirs.

Children borrow our steadiness before they build their own.

When your child is overwhelmed:

- 1 Stay calm yourself — slow breath, soft voice.
- 2 Get down to their eye level. Be present.
- 3 Validate the feeling: "I can see you're angry. That's okay."
- 4 Comfort first. Don't rush to fix.
- 5 After the storm, talk it through together.

Your past doesn't make you a bad parent.

It just means awareness helps. Here's how it can show up:

Feeling triggered by your child's outbursts

Harder to regulate your own emotions

Being overly protective or hypervigilant

Repeating patterns you didn't choose

Breaking the cycle

- 01 Seek therapy — it's a sign of strength
- 02 Join a parent support group
- 03 Notice your triggers without shame
- 04 Take time-outs when overwhelmed
- 05 Practice self-compassion — this takes courage

Your healing becomes their healing.

It takes a village.

No parent can — or should — do this alone. Build a circle of caring adults around your child.



Extended family

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins



Teachers & counselors

Trauma-informed school allies



Coaches & mentors

Activity leaders who show up

**YOUR
CHILD**



Neighbors & friends' parents

Everyday safe adults



Faith & community groups

Belonging beyond the home



Therapists & professionals

TF-CBT, EMDR, play therapy

When to seek professional help

Reaching out is a strength, not a failure.

Symptoms are severe or worsening	Big feelings escalating week over week
Daily life is disrupted	School, friendships, or family routines breaking down
Talk of self-harm or harming others	Take seriously — reach out today
You feel stuck or overwhelmed	You've tried and don't know the next step
A current crisis or major stressor	Loss, separation, illness, instability
You want to address your own history	To parent the way you want to

Finding the right help

APPROACHES

TF-CBT (Trauma-Focused CBT)
EMDR
Play therapy (younger kids)

WHERE TO START

Ask your pediatrician
Call your insurance for in-network providers
School counselor referrals
NCTSN therapist directory
Community mental health centers

Trauma does not have to define your child's future.

Your love. Your presence. Your consistency. These are the building blocks of healing — and you already have them.

Neuroplastic

The brain can heal and change well into adulthood.

Resilient

Most children recover with the right support.

Enough

One steady, caring adult is scientifically enough.