



One Minute Guide



What are Adverse Childhood Experiences ?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (sometimes known as ACEs) is a term which refers to stressful, complex or traumatic events that children are exposed to as they are growing up. When a child has faced adversity we know that they have lived through very difficult and challenging circumstances. The negative impact that adversity has on a child, where they find it difficult to cope, is classed as a 'Trauma' and that can manifest itself in mental, physical, emotional or developmental ill health.

What does adversity look like?

Adversity can be a single event or prolonged threats to a child's safety, security, trust or body integrity. These experiences directly affect the child and their environment; they can therefore affect the way a child feels, behaves and views the outside world.

The origins of the ACEs study

In 1995, an American study assessed the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (then referred to as ACEs). It studied the relationship between specific kinds of adversity that children faced in the home environment, abuse and neglect and household dysfunction. It looked at health risk behaviours such as smoking, suicide attempts, drug abuse and a high number of sexual partners as well as disease in adulthood such as cancer, heart disease, bronchitis etc. The study highlighted a significant relationship between the amount of Adverse Childhood Experiences, the adult health risk behaviours and diseases experienced later in life. To find out more about the study click [here](#). More recent research has included extra familial influences such as chronic poverty, violence in the community and racism for example.

What are the risks of Adverse Childhood Experiences?

According to research, groups of people with greater Adverse Childhood Experiences have a higher risk of negative outcomes. It is important to also remember, however that a child can do well despite adversity and trauma.

The ACES research allowed practitioners to be more compassionate and curious about the people they support as well as having a general understanding that people who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences are more likely than those who have not, to experience other mental health problems or suffer from poor academic achievement and poor health outcomes later on in life.

Common Adverse Childhood Experiences

Some examples can include:

- **Abuse** physical, emotional, sexual, neglect
- **Violence** or coercion in the home; being a member of a gang or victim of crime
- **Adjustments** migration, asylum, relationships, bereavement, natural disasters, pandemics
- **Family Adversity** substance or alcohol misuse, mental illness, criminal behaviour; destitution or deprivation, being a young carer.
- **Inhumane treatment** FGM, forced marriage, forced imprisonment

The impact & why this matters

Adverse Childhood Experiences matter because they can significantly alter the development and functioning of almost every system within the body. Early experiences of adversity can affect the development of cognitive skills, social skills and the ability to manage in relationships, emotional regulation and sensory process and regulation. As such, it is relevant to well-being and functioning in every aspect of life.

The extent to which an individual may be impacted by experiences of adversity and trauma is dependent on factors such as: when it occurred, the frequency, who was the perpetrator (when considering abuse and neglect). The impact will be mitigated by protective factors such as the existence of other secure relationships and the social support within a young person's life

Evidence shows other long term responses can include PTSD and attachment disorders but as no-one has the ability to determine why and when stress adaptation systems within a particular individual could be overwhelmed, we rely on probability and statistical analysis to help inform how we deal with them.

How the stress response works

The stress response of any individual can vary, for example, when faced with stressful or threatening situations a child will react naturally to the danger with a fight, flight or freeze response. The body then releases stress hormones causing pupils to dilate, and heart rate and blood pressure to increase.



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Toxic stress or over stimulation of these responses can result in a child or adult being in a **permanent state of stress**. Without being able to return to a more natural relaxed state, navigating a healthy relationship can prove difficult due to the inability to think rationally. [Read more about the brain and what happens when the amygdala is overactive.](#)

We know that people who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences are:



What are the protective factors of Adverse Childhood Experiences?

- Steady, consistent, positive adult relationships within the family and peers
- Problem solving skills and resilience
- Emotional regulation and literacy
- Access to a supportive wider community
- Compassionate and supportive professionals that are trauma aware, trauma informed and trauma responsive.
- Early intervention from support, therapeutic or safeguarding services

What are the implications for practitioners?

There are many reasons why some children and young adults will have high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences, it is important, therefore to identify the pre-existing vulnerabilities and risks present in order to reduce the long term impact.

Reducing the effects of Toxic Stress early

For those who have experiences Adverse Childhood Experiences there are a wide range of responses that can help to reduce its effect, such as, therapeutic sessions with mental health professionals, meditation, exercise and walking in nature. Helping a child to build core life-skills, including resilience, will reduce the effects of toxic stress.

You can:

- Think about how the experiences will have an impact on the child's healthy development and on their behaviours; all behaviour is a communication!
- Recognise the signs, and see beyond a child as just 'acting out'. Be empathetic and curious to their needs

- Try to help them become more grounded, give them choices and allow them to feel more in control
- Understand that it is likely this will have an impact on any attachment for that child and there will be mistrust at play
- Try and build a relationship with the child that is different to ones they have experienced before
- Remember that Adverse Childhood Experiences tend to be passed from generation to generation
- Follow a trauma informed, relational approach. To learn more about enabling a child to develop, learn, adapt and thrive see below for resources.

Adverse Childhood Experiences can affect anyone at anytime regardless of their income and social level. Early intervention can reduce toxic stress and the long term impact.

Signposting to services

- [Education Psychology Service](#) work with children 0-25 years as well as with parents, schools & colleges, early years and other agencies to understand and meet the needs of individuals with early adverse experiences.
- [Compass Wakefield](#)
- [Wakefield CAMHS SWYFT](#) mental health support
- [Wakefield FCAMHS](#) offer specialist consultations for complex presentations in children
- West Yorkshire Health & Care Partnership [Adversity, Trauma and Resilience group](#)
- [Wakefield Families Together](#)
- [Young Minds](#)

More Guidance, Resources & Training

- Adversity, Trauma & Resilience WSCP webpage www.wakefieldscp.org.uk/resources/trauma/
- **Education Psychology Service** [Relate to Educate: Embedding a relational approach in schools](#). View the [5 minute guide](#) - why to adopt this approach
- [NSPCC](#)—how childhood trauma affects child brain development
- Fight or flight response explained [Fight-or-flight response | Definition, Hormones, & Facts | Britannica](#)
- [Risk & Resilience TRAINING](#)
- Working definition of Trauma from gov.uk