

## Understanding the Impact of Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress

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Be sure to provide a content warning for participants, many of whom may have not recognized or revealed their own childhood trauma to anyone. Below is a suitable content warning that can be modified or used as is at the beginning of the lesson.

The discussion of childhood trauma and toxic stress can be uncomfortable and traumatic even for adults. Please feel free to step out or disengage from the discussions during this lesson if you feel unusual levels of stress or unsafe. The presenter has made arrangements for additional support if necessary.

### Introduction

Early life experiences, whether beneficial or harmful, have a tremendous impact on one's development, behavior, long-term health and life opportunities. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Kaiser Study, conducted by Vincent Felitti and other researchers from 1995 to 1997, showed a strong correlation between adverse childhood experiences — potentially traumatic events that occur before the age of 18 — and risk factors, such as smoking, severe obesity, depressed mood, and alcoholism, that contribute to the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the United States. As the number of ACEs increased, so did the risk for negative outcomes. People with six (out of 10) or more ACEs died nearly 20 years earlier on average than those without ACEs.

### Objectives

1. Understand how stress impacts children (ages 0 to 18) and the difference between tolerable and toxic stress.

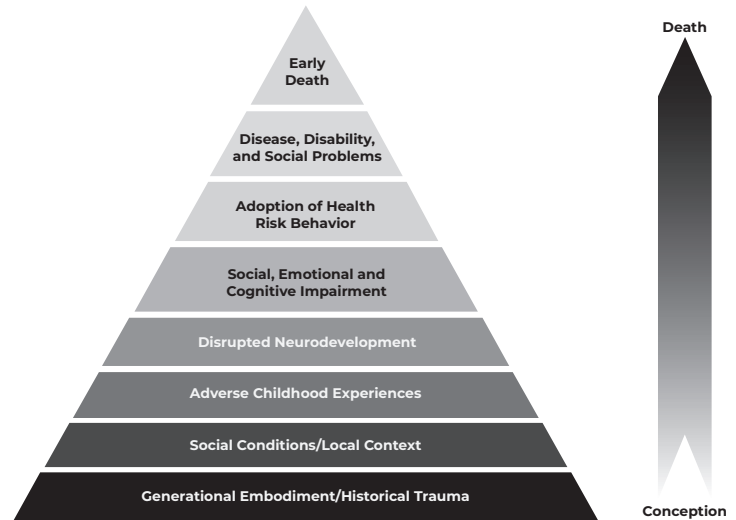


Image 1: *Adverse Childhood Experiences*

2. Learn about the correlation between childhood adversity and toxic stress.
3. Become familiar with the possible signs and symptoms of toxic stress.
4. Understand how caregivers can buffer the effects of toxic stress and help children develop resiliency.

### Intended Audience

- General public
- Human and social service agency staff
- Early childhood professionals
- Educators and after-school staff
- 4-H leaders and other youth-serving organizations
- Civic groups
- Church groups

## Preparing for the Lesson

- Review the “Understanding the Impact of Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress” fact sheet.
- View the video Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (Module 1: Lesson 2: The ACE Study) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAqw9eWRSIct0> to become more familiar with the ACE Study.
- View the video Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (Module 1: Lesson 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Brain Development, and Toxic Stress) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-SSwYTe8TY&t=21s> to learn more about toxic stress.
- Make copies (optional) of the handout/graphic What are ACEs? And How Do They Relate to Toxic Stress? at <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions>
- Have an evaluation form for each participant to complete the end of the lesson.

## Presenting the Lesson

Present the lesson using the fact sheet and the information provided in “Preparing for the Lesson” in this guide. If time allows, you may want to show the two videos listed above from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**CAUTION** – Remember that ACEs are common and that discussing ACEs and toxic stress can be triggering for some individuals who have experienced trauma. It is important for you to be familiar with the resources that are available in your community to refer individuals to. You may want to ask a mental health professional to partner with you to provide this lesson or be available to answer questions or meet with someone who has experienced trauma.

## Community Awareness Activities

Organize a showing of a video or documentary that introduces the community to ACEs and the effects of toxic stress. Suggested videos/documentary include:

**Paper Tigers** — This documentary produced by KPJR Films is set within and around the campus of Lincoln Alternative High School in the rural community of Walla Walla, Washington. Paper Tigers

asks the following questions: What does it mean to be a trauma-informed school? And how do you educate teens whose childhood experiences have left them with a brain and body ill-suited to learn?

**Resilience** — The latest KPJR documentary that delves into the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and a new movement to treat and prevent toxic stress. A discussion guide to accompany screenings of the film is available.

Partner with a local library to sponsor a community reading event and discussion using a book about ACEs. Ideas include:

- *The Last Best Cure: My Quest to Awaken the Healing Parts of My Brain and Get Back My Body, My Joy, and My Life* by Donna Jackson Nakazawa; Avery, 2013
- *Scared Sick: The Role of Childhood Trauma in Adult Disease* by Robin Karr-Morse with Meredith S. Wiley; Basic Books, 2012.
- *The Body that Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk; Viking, 2014
- *Help for Billy* by Heather T. Forbes; Beyond Consequences Institute, 2012
- *Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity* by Nadine Burke Harris; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018

## Resources

The Brain Architecture Game — This tabletop board game experience was designed to engage policymakers, community and business leaders, health and education service providers, and government officials in understanding the science of early brain development — what promotes it, what derails it, and what are the consequences for society. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architecture-game/>

Community Resilience Initiative — Resilience Trumps ACEs card games, bookmarks, posters, etc. to teach about resiliency.

ACEs Connection (<https://www.acesconnection.com/>) — A social network that recognizes the impact of a wide variety of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in shaping adult behavior and health, and that promotes trauma-informed and resilience-building practices and policies in all families, organizations, systems, and communities.

Kansas Power of the Positive (<http://www.kansaspowerofthepositive.org/>) — A statewide coalition that is committed to all Kansas children growing up in safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. The coalition focuses on societal level interventions to prevent adverse childhood experiences and believes the conditions in which families live, including influence of family-friendly workplace policies and practices, are key. Learn more about initiatives in the State of Kansas Child Maltreatment Prevention Plan.

## References (in order of use in fact sheet)

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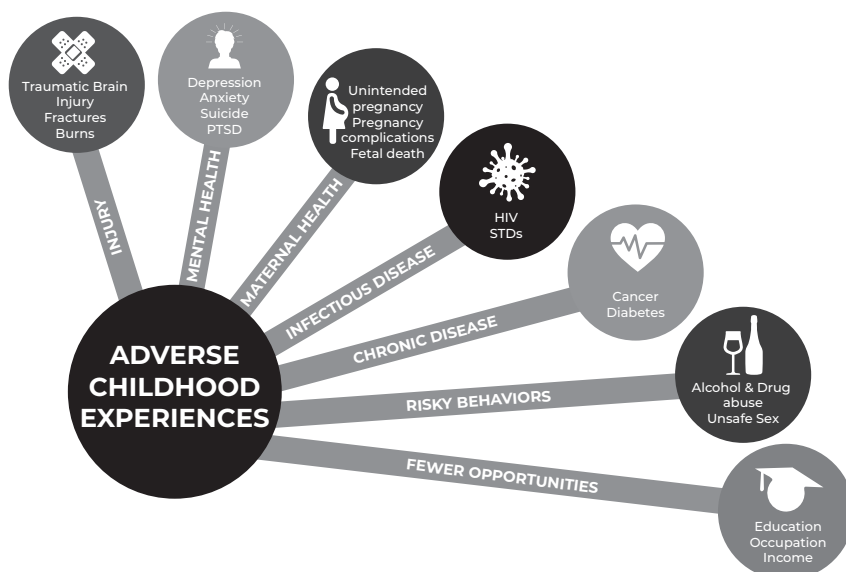
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## Reviewers

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**Image 2:** Adverse Childhood Experiences outcomes

# Evaluation

## Understanding the Impact of Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress

Local Unit where program was offered: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Instructor \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for participating in our program! To help us improve the program, we would like to gather responses to the questions below. Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to respond to any questions you do not want to answer. This information will only be used for program evaluation purposes, and you will not be identified in any way by the information you provide.

1. Because of your participation in this program, did you learn anything new?  
 Yes       No
2. Because of your participation in this program, do you plan on taking any action or changing anything in your life?  
 Yes       No
3. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Gender  
 Male       Female       Prefer not to respond
5. For the following items, please indicate your level of agreement by placing a check in the appropriate box.

After participating in this program:	Strongly		Neither Agree		Strongly
	Agree	Agree	or Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
I understand what childhood adversity is.					
I can explain the difference between positive, tolerable and toxic stress.					
I can list some of signs and symptoms of toxic stress.					
I understand the importance of a reliable, positive, caring, protective parent or caregiver.					
I can describe buffers at the individual, family and community level.					

6. Please provide any additional comments you may have.
  
7. May we contact you later to talk with you about this program?  Yes     No

If yes, please leave your contact information.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing this form. We appreciate your feedback!

To group leader: Please enter the information into the PEARS website.

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