

# We Can Prevent Childhood Adversity

The Science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Shows We Can Improve People's Lives and Help Them Thrive

## What Are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Adverse childhood experiences, or **ACEs**, mean **potentially traumatic events in childhood (0-17 years)** such as neglect and experiencing or witnessing violence.

**ACEs** can negatively impact **physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral** development.



## Types of ACEs



### ABUSE

- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual



### HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES\*

- Substance misuse
- Mental illness
- Suicidal thoughts and behavior
- Divorce or separation
- Incarceration
- Intimate partner violence or domestic violence

\*The child lives with a parent, caregiver, or other adult who experiences one or more of these challenges.



### NEGLECT

- Emotional
- Physical



### OTHER ADVERSITY

- Bullying
- Community violence
- Natural disasters
- Refugee or wartime experiences
- Witnessing or experiencing acts of terrorism

## Many People Report ACEs

According to data collected from **more than 144,000 adults across 25 states** between 2015 and 2017:

**61%** reported experiencing **AT LEAST ONE** type of ACE.

**16%** reported experiencing **FOUR OR MORE** types of ACEs.

## Some Groups Are More Likely to Have Experienced ACEs

Multiple studies show that people who identified as members of these groups as adults reported experiencing **significantly more ACEs**:



Black, Hispanic/Latino, or multiracial people



People who are unemployed or unable to work



People making less than \$15,000 per year



People with less than a high school education



Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people

### ACEs Can Accumulate and Their Effects Last Beyond Childhood

The effects of ACEs can add up over time and affect a person **throughout their life**.

- Children who repeatedly and chronically experience adversity can suffer from **toxic stress**.
- Toxic stress happens when the brain endures **repeated stress or danger**, then releases fight or flight hormones like cortisol.
- This internal alarm system **increases heart rate and blood pressure** and **damages the digestive and immune systems**.
- Toxic stress can disrupt **organ, tissue, and brain development**. Over time, this can limit a person's ability to process information, make decisions, interact with others, and regulate emotions. **These consequences may follow a person into adulthood.**

### ACEs Can Echo Across Generations

The consequences of ACEs can be **passed down from one generation to the next** if children don't have protective buffers like...

... ...  
positive childhood experiences

OR

a caring adult in their lives.

Also, when families experience **historical and systemic racism** or living in **poverty for generations**, the effects of ACEs can **add up over time**.

### ACEs Can Increase Risk for Disease, Early Death, and Poor Social Outcomes

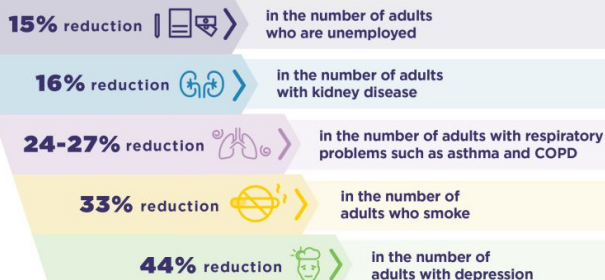
Research shows that **experiencing a higher number of ACEs** is associated with **many of the leading causes of death** like heart disease and cancer.

- **CHRONIC HEALTH CONDITIONS**  
Coronary heart disease • Stroke • Asthma  
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)  
Cancer • Kidney disease • Diabetes • Obesity
- **MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS**  
Depression
- **HEALTH RISK BEHAVIORS**  
Smoking • Heavy drinking or alcoholism  
Substance misuse • Physical inactivity • Risky sexual behavior • Suicidal thoughts and behavior
- **SOCIAL OUTCOMES**  
Lack of health insurance • Unemployment • Less than a high school diploma or equivalent education

## We Can Create Positive Childhood Experiences

- **Strengthen families' financial stability**  
Paid time off, child tax credits, and flexible and consistent work schedules
- **Promote social norms that protect against violence**  
Positive parenting practices and prevention efforts involving men and boys
- **Help kids have a good start**  
Early learning programs and affordable preschool and childcare programs
- **Teach healthy relationship skills**  
Conflict resolution, negative feeling management, pressure from peers, and healthy non-violent dating relationships
- **Connect youth with activities and caring adults**  
School or community mentoring programs and after-school activities
- **Intervene to lessen immediate and long-term harms**  
ACEs education, therapy, and family-centered treatment for substance abuse

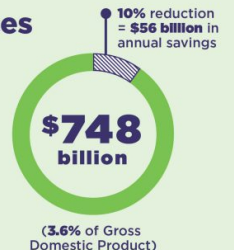
## What Could Happen If We Prevent ACEs?



## Positive Childhood Experiences Improve the Economy

The primary prevention of ACEs — **stopping ACEs before they start** — would benefit the economy and relieve pressures on healthcare systems.

ACEs-related illness accounts for an estimated **\$748 billion** in financial costs in North America each year. A **10% reduction in ACEs** could equate to an annual savings of **\$56 billion**.



### Healthy childhoods start now.

Working together, we can help create neighborhoods, communities, and a world in which every child can thrive.

Learn how you can help! [vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/aces-training](https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/aces-training)



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control