

Pipeline to Prison – Adverse Childhood Events

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I always start the class out with introductions. As my eyes swept the room, I took in all the men wearing orange jumpsuits and I prepared mentally to scale a huge mountain. Each class always starts with emotional walls and barriers that I must figure out how to breach. Today, the mountain came tumbling down because of one spoken sentence from a bearded inmate with watery eyes.

I noticed him when they first shuffled in, because he was completely disengaged. This inmate was sitting in the corner of the back row. His body was still and his head hung low. When it came to his turn for an introduction, he sat slumped and unresponsive. The inmate next to him, elbowed his side and he jumped and looked up at me.

“Hi”, I said, “We are introducing ourselves and saying why we are here.”

With a strong clear voice he said, “My son was 11 years old. He was my only child. He committed suicide. I’m here to know what I did wrong.”

The room was completely still and silent.



When I first started this parenting class for inmates, I wasn't prepared for what I would unearth. When I handed out the ACE (adverse childhood events) quiz to the inmates, I wasn't prepared for the results: The average score for inmates coming through my class is 6.

You can think of an ACEs score as a cholesterol score for childhood trauma. The 10 ACE questions relate to the following:

- Physical, sexual and verbal abuse.
- Physical and emotional neglect.
- A family member who is:
 - depressed or diagnosed with other mental illness;
 - addicted to alcohol or another substance;
 - in prison.
- Witnessing a mother being abused.
- Losing a parent to separation, divorce or other reason.

An ACE score of 6 means you are 1200 percent more likely to commit suicide. A 6 means that the inmate sitting slumped over in an orange jumpsuit with crossed arms and a gravelly voice was once a hurting child. A score of 6 is a pipeline to prison, as children with high aces are 59% more likely to be arrested as a juveniles (National Institute of Justice)

Decades of research have solidified the link between childhood trauma and poor outcomes later in life. The number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) determines the patient's risk for a wide range of health problems including heart disease, chronic bronchitis or emphysema, diabetes, severe obesity, substance abuse, suicide attempts, cancers of all kinds and early death. (aces too high)

I went into this class to teach inmates how to handle the hard behaviors they see in their children. I wanted to help them parent better, and also help them support their children as best they could. I stand in front of them and teach that **Scared Kids do Scary Things**, I walk away each week realizing that **Hurt Adults Hurt Others**. I work with scared children who have grown into hurt adults.

Trauma is contagious. **You cannot sit in a room with severely traumatized people and not feel their fear.**

“Childhood trauma is a huge factor within the criminal justice system. It is among the most important things that shapes addictive and criminal behavior in adulthood.” said Christopher Wildeman, a sociologist at Cornell University and co-director of the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.



Teaching parenting skills in the jail has changed how I look at every woman and man that comes handcuffed into my class. I no longer see them as criminals, I see them as someone who had a traumatic background and is now responsible for the emotional well-being of a child. It scares the hell out of me. Without a strong attachment to a caring adult, unprocessed childhood trauma will likely lead toward either turning on oneself, or turning on others. As a public health nurse I have stumbled onto a scary truth – **ACEs are contagious.**

Over the months, I have sat and listened to their stories. I have cried tears with a roomful of incarcerated and hardened men and women. I have listened to childhoods filled with molestation, abandonment, abuse and neglect. Long before these inmates were perpetrators, they were childhood victims. What many of them saw and lived, they eventually imitated. Drugs became a way out, crime naturally followed as they survived.

They became addicts because **drugs are an external medication to cope with internal pain.** They have been locked up for the very methods they used to survive toxic stress. Children with toxic stress live a life of flight, fight or freeze. Their developing brains are damaged by the constant overdose of stress hormones and portions of their brain growth is stunted. Their response to the world around them is based on survival and constant danger. When a child lives in a place of survival, they are not developing the upper levels of the brain; places where we find executive function and working memory.

As they move into adulthood, they use drugs, alcohol, violence, sex, etc. to escape the pain and memories of childhood. The average age that the inmates started using drugs is 11 years old. The men and women I work with started using drugs at an age where neuroplasticity is HUGE! This means that their brain is ripe for outside input and change. For this reason, they have developed a brain that is altered through traumatic environment and chemical exposure.

We always thought it was nature vs nurture, but what we are learning is that it is “nature dancing with nurture over time. Beginning prenatally, continuing through infancy, and extending into childhood and beyond, development is driven by an ongoing interaction between biology (as defined by genetic predisposition-nature) and ecology (as defined by the social and physical environment-nurture)”. (Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics 9/2018)

Resilient means that a person is doing well for the situation they are in. For example, a child might be coping despite the neglect, abuse, or trauma. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from these difficulties or traumas. And if someone ended up an addict, a criminal or a social deviant, I figured this was the result of poor genetics or some random process. It never crossed my mind, that the man busted for drugs or the woman who was a prostitute was part of a cycle. That long before these inmates were

perpetrators, they were childhood victims. What many of them saw and lived, they eventually imitated. Drugs became a way out and crime naturally followed.

Sitting in the jail with broken boys and girls who live with immaturity, fear, blame, shame, resentments, anger, confusion and suffering; it all points to core trauma wounds and a lack of connection. They were not resilient children, because resilience is built through human connection and trust.

Connection builds resiliency.

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. (Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University)

By the end of class, he knew why his son had died. He had died because he could not overcome the impact of childhood trauma and mental illness. His son could not overcome the inner voice that whispered how unworthy and irreparable he was. His 11 year-old boy could not longer sit in a space of hopelessness and pain; so he took his own life and childhood trauma claimed one more victim. His father left my class weeping silently. There were no words of hope that I could give.