

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Colette Murphy

Stresses and Traumas

- ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experience
- An example of an ACE would be “complex trauma;” a kind of ACE that manifests its symptoms *after* exposure
- 1 in 16 people have 4 or more ACEs
- ACEs prove that there is a tie between mental and physical health; for example, ACEs have a direct impact on Type Two Diabetes
- When it comes to ACEs, the *number* of traumatic experiences matters more than *severity*
- A student with one ACE is 2.2x more likely to have attendance issues, with each trauma multiplying by x.2
- There are three realms of ACEs: Community, Environment, and Household

Positive stress: part of a healthy development; brief increase in heart rate; elevated hormone levels



Tolerable stress: time limited and buffered by a support system; brain and organs recover; body's alert systems are more severe



Toxic stress: frequent and prolonged (usually unaddressed); disrupts the brain's architecture and organ input; risk of disease and impairment

How do ACEs occur?

Trauma is not what happens to you, it's what happens inside you that rewires your brain. Trauma only *becomes traumatic* when it exceeds a person's ability to cope. Trauma depends on the event *and* the availability of resources and support.

Examples of Trauma:

- Bullying
- Community violence
- Complex trauma
- Disasters
- Early childhood trauma
- Intimate partner violence
- Medical violence
- Physical abuse
- Race-based trauma
- Refugee trauma
- Sexual abuse
- Sex trafficking
- Terrorism and violence
- Traumatic grief

Upstairs v.s. Downstairs Brain

In a school setting, a teacher's goal is to get students away from using the *limbic part* of their brain that controls emotionally charged responses to situations, and instead use their brain to only shift to “survival mode” when *absolutely needed*. ACEs affect children so much that the pleasure and reward system, impulse control, and the fear response center are all affected and often *rewired* when faced with ACEs. In general when your fight or flight reaction is overly activated as a child, it's so bad that DNA, hormones, and even the immune system are all at risk.

ACEs in a Classroom Setting

When in a classroom setting, asking a student to identify their feelings and to attune themselves to their biological needs will allow them to manage their stress intensity.

Balance the academic push for success with a safe environment in school.

Be transparent with your students!

Through facial expression, tone, and eye contact teachers are able to support positive growth in children; without these, there will be stunted development and less neural plasticity in the brain. Without healthy attachments, children feel helpless, desperate, have a lack of or have no future goals, show a loss of interest, and typically have unstable relationships in the future.