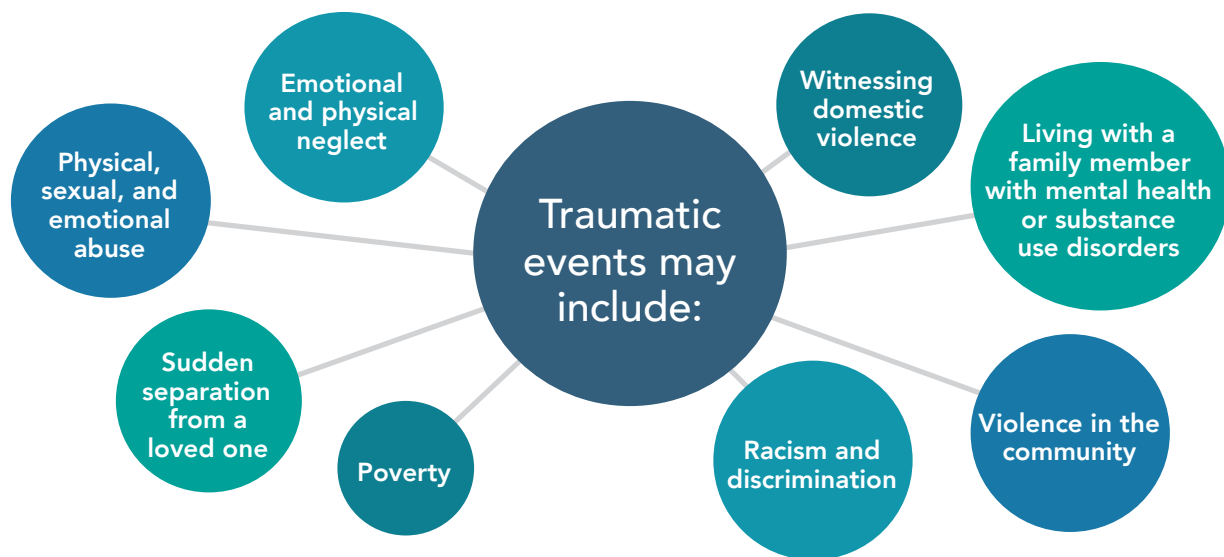


Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences

Trauma occurs when frightening events or situations overwhelm someone's ability to cope with what has happened. Accidents, crimes, or natural disasters are some examples of these events. Trauma can also happen with ongoing exposure to harmful conditions.

Trauma may have long-lasting effects on mental and physical well-being. Trauma that occurs during childhood can harm a child's brain development. [Adverse childhood experiences](#), or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. Use this resource to learn about ACEs. Find tips for how to support children who have traumatic experiences.



ACE Study Found a Link Between Stress and Health

The [ACE study](#) looked at the effect of childhood abuse and neglect on adult health and well-being. The study was completed from 1995 to 1997. It asked more than 17,000 adults about their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors. Researchers found that traumatic childhood experiences had a big effect on health outcomes later.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to [collect data on ACEs and health outcomes](#). Most of the participants in the original ACE study were white, insured, over 40 years old, and college-educated. Recent ACE studies have looked at a more diverse group of people. These studies have also linked adverse experiences like racism, oppression, intergenerational trauma, and community violence with long-term health problems.

The ACE study showed how traumatic experiences affect children's brains and bodies. Stress causes the body to release cortisol. High levels of cortisol — known as chronic stress — make it harder for the brain to grow and learn. Children who experience ongoing trauma may struggle more in the classroom. ACEs are also linked to adult [chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use problems](#).

About [25% of adults](#) in the U.S. have had three or more ACEs. The risk for ACEs is [especially high](#) among certain groups of people. This includes people who are Black, Hispanic, or multiracial. People with less than a high-school education, with low-income, and those who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ are also at higher risk.



Limitations and Strengths of the ACE Score

The number of ACEs a person reports is known as their ACE score. However, the ACE score is not a perfect measure of childhood stress. The ACE score has limitations. The ACEs study gives information about health outcomes for the whole population. The score is not intended as a tool to learn about individuals. The score also doesn't measure protective factors that may help someone deal with trauma. Anyone who asks about ACEs should make sure a trained mental health professional can follow-up. It may cause pain and distress to ask someone about traumatic events.

Head Start programs should not use an ACE questionnaire on adults or children. But it's important to know how ACEs affect long-term health and development. It helps to understand and respond to the factors that put people at risk. An early childhood program that has safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children and families can reduce the effects of those ACEs and promote healing.

Factors That Increase Likelihood of Trauma

Traumatic experiences don't affect everyone the same way. Something that traumatizes one child might not have the same effect on another child. Something that is overwhelming to a child may be different for an adult. A child and adult may feel grief over the same event but have different ways of showing their feelings. After traumatic events, it's important to learn about each person's feelings.

It's impossible to know if an event will be traumatic for someone. Some factors make it more likely that a person will experience trauma. These include:

■ History of trauma:

Someone who has already been through something traumatic may feel more traumatized in another upsetting experience.

■ History of mental health conditions:

Depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders may get worse after a traumatic experience. Having a history of these can make a scary event more traumatic. Having family members with these conditions can also make an experience more traumatic.

■ Closeness to the experience:

Witnessing an event (e.g., getting hurt or seeing someone get hurt) is more likely to cause long-term trauma than having heard about an event.

■ Lack of mental health support:

Emotions such as fear, guilt, helplessness, and shame are normal after a traumatic experience. Without mental health support, these feelings might make it more difficult to recover.

■ Dissociation:

Dissociation is when people feel disconnected from the world around them. They may feel cut off from their body and surroundings, be numb to physical touch and feelings (as if they are floating outside their body), or have no memories of an event. Dissociation may contribute to a scary event becoming traumatic.

■ Lack of a support system:

Supportive family, caregivers, friends, and community can protect someone after a traumatic event. Someone without a support system may be more likely to have long-term effects from trauma.



Strategies to Reduce the Effects of Trauma and ACEs

Adults can help children become less overwhelmed by adverse experiences. Support from nurturing caregivers helps children start to understand and recover from traumatic events.

Strategies that help children cope and that can support resilience and recovery include:

Tune in to your own feelings as a caregiver.

Before trying to care for someone else, check in with your own emotions to make sure that you are calm and thinking clearly. Take some deep breaths and move your body to stay present.

Make sure the child is safe and focus on supporting the child's sense of safety.

Children must feel safe before they can start to recover from a scary experience. An adult can create physical safety by making sure a child is away from harm. Help a child feel emotionally safe by naming and acknowledging a child's feelings without judgment. It might be helpful to say, "That was scary. You are safe now." Offer children opportunities to talk about experiences. This can help build regulation and social and emotional skills.



Encourage a sense of belonging and connection.

Positive connection with others is a core part of supporting resilience. Feeling accepted is important for everyone.

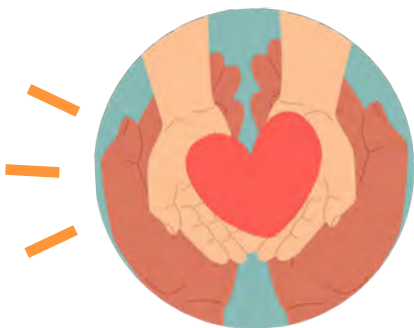


Help children regulate their emotions.

Young children often need help to calm down when they have big feelings. This is normal. When children experience their wide range of feelings, adults can show them how to lower the intensity of their feelings. This is part of helping them feel safe, connected, and accepted.

Teach children coping skills.

Belly breathing, practicing mindfulness, and physically moving help children get to know their bodies. The better they know how to calm their bodies, the more likely they are to use coping strategies during stressful times.



Help children label their feelings.

There are thousands of words to describe feelings. Giving children the opportunity to learn them is the first step to emotional literacy. You can teach children to label their emotions, by modeling or by naming their feelings and describing what you see. For example, you can say, "It looks like you are frustrated right now. I see you trying to stack those blocks into a tower. Your face is scrunched up, and you stomped your foot when it fell over. You are working hard!"



Support children to learn problem-solving skills.

Every day, children meet social problems they don't quite know how to solve. Introducing simple solutions to typical daily challenges helps children build problem-solving skills. Practice with support is key! When you notice children beginning to struggle with a problem, remind them of their solutions and help them choose a strategy in the moment.

Offer descriptive praise for children's efforts.

Instead of telling children what not to do, tell them what they can do. When a child is meeting a behavior expectation, getting feedback helps them feel proud and learn. Descriptive praise is more than saying "good job!" Instead, you can describe the positive behavior you see. For example, when a child is playing well with another child in the block area, you could say, "Wow! I like how you stack the blocks up one at a time. Thank you for taking turns!"

Emphasize predictable routines and schedules.

Children thrive when their days feel predictable. This happens with consistency — the same routines every day whenever possible. When a schedule or routine changes, it's helpful to name those changes in advance if possible. This might happen when outdoor play cannot happen because of weather. You might say, "I know you love to play outside. Today is a rainy day, so we need to stay inside. We will have a dance party instead."



Head Start heals.



National Center on
Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

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