



Training Module: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Goal

An understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), commonly recognized as childhood trauma, is vital to the overall understanding of the role that response to trauma and mental health plays in general personal wellness.

This module focuses on common responses that occur in reaction to ACEs when an individual's coping abilities are overwhelmed as they experience an adverse event or series of events. ACEs appear in many forms and can affect brain development, behavior, and learning. These effects convey life-long implications for health. Childhood trauma is not something one just “gets over” as one ages. The repeated stress of abuse, neglect, and family members struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues has real, tangible effects on the development of the brain. These effects unfold across a lifetime, exposing those who have experienced high levels of trauma to the risk of chronic physical health issues, depression, and other mental health struggles.

It is important to remember that many students and their families have been exposed to multiple traumatic events—some over long periods of time. Though both the children and their family members will be affected by these traumatic event(s) throughout their lives, getting appropriate support is possible. This support is the key to overcoming and adapting to achieve healthy overall wellness.

When focusing on mental health and wellness in the student community, a strong understanding of ACEs is necessary in order to better understand the challenges they are facing. It is important to communicate that there is hope in spite of circumstances. The module concerning Trauma-Informed Care and Best Practices, focused solely on the best practices of trauma-informed care, was developed to give educators concrete ways to work successfully with students affected by various types of trauma and with various types of responses.

Objectives

- Understand the importance of ACEs in the lives of students and families.
- Learn to use the *ACEs Questionnaire* to determine personal ACEs scores.
- Determine the appropriate resources to connect with when helping others determine their ACEs score and any resulting mental/emotional/physical health issues.



What to Know Before Presenting the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) PowerPoint

1. Introduce the original ACEs study and its long-term findings.
Explain that higher scores on the *ACEs Questionnaire* have been linked to mental and physical challenges in adulthood, including the risk of developing alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and chronic illness. ACEs may have long-term effects on one's behaviors and relationships into adulthood.
2. Identify the possible triggers in reaction to ACEs.
Anyone who has experienced a traumatic event may discover that certain sights, sounds, smells, etc. can trigger painful responses to that event years after it occurred. It is possible that school staff being trained in this subject may have their own ACEs brought to memory and need to realize the importance of seeking their own support. Emphasize that this is a healthy step and will enable them to improve their personal wellness and do their jobs even better.
3. Discussion points include:
 - a. Adverse community environments, including poverty and community violence, will foment exposure to ACEs.
 - b. ACEs are very prevalent. According to the ACEs study, two out of three children/youth were exposed to violence and one in five adults report a score of 3 or higher. Over 45% of US children and two-thirds of adults have been exposed to at least one Adverse Childhood Experience—such as physical or emotional neglect or abuse, living with someone with a drug, alcohol, or serious mental health problem, the death of a parent, and being exposed to violence or discrimination in the home or community.
 - c. Some students are excessively exposed to potential ACEs due simply to a lifestyle that includes family issues, frequent moves, poverty, etc.
4. Stress that there is hope.
There are protective factors that can be offered on individual and societal levels to alleviate the effects of ACEs. The skills of resilience, which can lead to strength and capability, can be taught and learned.



The messages in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) PowerPoint emphasize:

- **Anyone is susceptible to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).**
 - There are three categories:
 - Abuse
 - Neglect
 - Family/household challenges
- **Scores are important.**
 - A score of 4 or higher has been linked by researchers to a higher risk of alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and chronic illness.
- **Environmental factors increase risks.**
 - Poverty, discrimination, and community violence give rise to the occurrence of ACEs.
- **ACEs are very prevalent.**
 - According to the ACEs study, two out of three children/youth were exposed to violence and one in five adults report a score of 3 or higher. Over 45% of US children and two-thirds of adults have been exposed to at least one Adverse Childhood Experience—such as physical or emotional neglect or abuse, living with someone with a drug, alcohol, or serious mental health problem, the death of a parent, and being exposed to violence or discrimination in the home or community.
- **ACEs can be prevented.**
 - We have the ability to provide support to parents and communities to prevent some of the community risk factors listed above.
 - Provide economic support.
 - Provide parenting assistance.
 - Provide access to early childhood programs.
 - Provide access to physical and mental health resources.
- **Relationships make a difference.**
 - The support of a trusted adult can affect how a child reacts to and recovers from a traumatic event.
- **Resilience can be taught and learned.**
 - The importance of resilience must be stressed. ACEs can actually provide a path to stronger resilience and the ability to overcome.