What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

An adverse childhood experience (ACE) is defined as “a traumatic experience in a person’s life occurring before the age of 18 that the person remembers as an adult”\(^1\). There are three categories of ACEs: abuse (emotional, physical, and sexual), household dysfunction (mother treated violently, substance use, mental illness, separation/divorce, and incarceration), and neglect (emotional and physical)\(^2\).

How do ACEs Affect Individuals?

Over the life course, ACEs affect the behavior, physical health and mental health of those that have experienced them\(^3\):

Key Points

1. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to a number of negative outcomes, including outcomes related to behavior, physical health and mental health.
2. 61.0% of adults in Connecticut report experiencing at least one ACE.
3. 44.0% of parenting women in New Haven report experiencing at least one ACE.
4. Trauma-informed/sensitive communities with high community capacity have been shown to reduce the experience of ACEs.
5. Trauma-informed/sensitive schools offer one potential solution to addressing the challenges faced by children who have experienced ACEs.
6. The MOMS Partnership® is working to reduce maternal depression, which is one of the earliest ACEs to which a child could be exposed.
How Do ACEs Affect Adults in Connecticut?
In Connecticut, 61.0% of adults surveyed reported experiencing at least one ACE, with 23.1% reporting 3 or more ACEs. Those that had experienced 3-8 ACEs, compared to those who had not experienced an ACE, were more likely to report limited activity, to smoke, and to report poor mental and general health.

How Do ACEs Affect Parenting Women in New Haven?
An assessment conducted by the New Haven Mental health Outreach for MotherS (MOMS) Partnership® (www.newhavenmomspartnership.org) found that 44.0% of parenting women in New Haven reported experiencing at least one ACE and 18.6% of women reported experiencing 3 or more ACEs. The most common form of ACE reported by parenting women was recurrent and severe emotional abuse (19.9%), followed by a family member being imprisoned (17.4%), as shown in the figure below:

Those women in New Haven who reported abuse* and those that experienced household dysfunction† were more likely to report symptoms of depression, as measured by the CES-D, than those that did not report these types of ACEs. Additionally, those women who experienced ACEs were more likely to report experiencing very poor, poor or fair emotional health (compared to good or excellent emotional health) than those who reported not experiencing an ACE.

How Can ACEs Be Addressed in Communities?
Trauma-informed systems, such as those that serve children and families in the community, have the potential to help address the growing issue of ACEs. These systems aim to increase the awareness of trauma, to increase collaboration amongst organizations, and to provide training to community

* Abuse – emotional, physical or sexual
† Household dysfunction - alcohol or drug use, family imprisoned, mentally ill family member, mother being treated violently or biological parents not being present
members that may have regular contact with those exposed to trauma\textsuperscript{6}, such as health care providers, first responders, the child welfare system and schools\textsuperscript{5}. Recent research involving entire communities has found that ACEs in young adults can be reduced through “community networks with high community capacity”\textsuperscript{7}, marking the community as an important potential mechanism for intervening in the lives of those who have experienced ACEs.

**How Can ACEs Be Addressed in Schools?**

Currently, many school employees are provided with limited training regarding the lasting impact that trauma can have on students and how to deal with potential behaviors resulting from these experiences\textsuperscript{5}. However, a recent movement, the trauma-sensitive or trauma-informed school movement, hopes to address this issue by creating schools where all students are supported and the experience of trauma and its consequences are addressed\textsuperscript{8}.

The following are key characteristics of adults in a trauma-sensitive school:

- “Share an understanding of how trauma impacts learning and why a school-wide approach is needed for creating a trauma-sensitive school.
- Support all students to feel safe – physically, socially, emotionally and academically.
- Address student’s needs in holistic ways, taking their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being into account.
- Explicitly connect students to the school community, providing them with multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills.
- Embrace teamwork with a sense of shared responsibility for every student.
- Anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students and the surrounding community”\textsuperscript{8}.

Creating a trauma-sensitive school has the potential to not only create a supportive environment, but could potentially lead to a number of beneficial outcomes for the school and for students, including reductions in dropout rates, absenteeism, detentions and bullying, as well as improved test scores and teacher satisfaction\textsuperscript{9}. In the 2013 publication, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Creating and Advocating for Trauma Sensitive Schools*, it is noted that screening for trauma in schools is not recommended, due to its potential to stigmatize and single out children\textsuperscript{8}. Rather a more holistic approach to dealing with trauma is emphasized, such as the trauma-sensitive or trauma-informed school movement.

**How Is the MOMS Partnership\textsuperscript{®} Addressing ACEs?**

The goal of the Mental health Outreach for MotherS (MOMS) Partnership is to improve the emotional wellbeing of families. As such, the MOMS Partnership works to transform the delivery of services to families to prevent and reduce maternal depression, which could be one of the earliest ACEs to which children are exposed. Visit [www.newhavenmomspartnership.org](http://www.newhavenmomspartnership.org) for more information.
References