

ACE Article for Children's Council 09

Have you ever heard of an ACE score? It has to do with the emotional impact of our early experiences, prior to age 18. ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences and has captured national attention as researchers are discovering the powerful impact that unhealed early emotions have on the development of a number of chronic adult health conditions, as well as on the choice to use drugs to self-medicate, whether the drugs are legal or illegal. The ACE study is landmark research regarding the origins of disease, and poses the question of how childhood experiences affect adult health decades later. The study is a collaborative effort between Kaiser Permanente in San Diego and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

About 17,500 adults have participated in the study from diverse ethnicities and walks of life. These patients were from a typical middle class American population. They asked these volunteers to help study 8 categories of childhood abuse and household dysfunction. The 3 abuse categories were: recurrent physical abuse, recurrent severe emotional abuse, and contact sexual abuse. The 5 household dysfunctions were: growing up in a household where someone was in prison; where the mother was treated violently; with an alcoholic or a drug user; where someone was chronically depressed, mentally ill, or suicidal; or where at least one biological parent was lost to the patient during childhood—regardless of cause. An individual exposed to none of these had an ACE score of 0; an individual exposed to any 4, had an ACE of 4, and so forth. Because the average project participant was 57 years old, they were measuring the effect of childhood experiences on adult health status a half-century later. *The two most important findings are that adverse childhood experiences are (1) vastly more common than recognized or acknowledged, and (2) they have a powerful relation to adult health a half-century later.* For instance, 22%, more than one in every five San Diego Kaiser members was sexually abused as a child!

The findings from the Study provide remarkable insight into how we become what we are, and have important medical, social, and economic implications. The Study reveals a powerful relationship between our early emotional experiences as children and our physical and mental health as adults. It documents the conversion of childhood emotional trauma into organic disease later in life. How does this happen? This research makes it clear that time does not fully heal some of the adverse experiences found to be common in the childhoods of a large population of middle-aged, middle class Americans. One doesn't 'just get over' some things, not even 50 years later.

The ACE Study has timely insights on obesity. The study actually grew out of observations made in an obesity program offered at Kaiser during the mid 80's. The participants were successfully losing large amounts of weight, yet were dropping out of the program. When detailed life histories of these patients were done, it was found that childhood sexual abuse was remarkably common among these patients. For many, obesity was not their problem; it was their protective *solution* to problems that previously had never been acknowledged. One woman who was raped at age 23 and gained 105 pounds in the following year commented that when you're overweight you are

overlooked, and that was the way she wanted to be. Many patients in the weight loss program had awareness of the association between abuse and their obesity, but when this information surfaced in discussion with their MD, it was often dismissed as having occurred too far in past to bear relevance to their current health conditions. Naturally, not every overweight individual has abuse or neglect in his/her history, but for extreme obesity there is often a strong emotional link. The following bullet points provide a brief glimpse into the relationship between ACE scores and habits that are harmful to health.

- Smoking

Smoking underlies some of the most important causes of death in America. The ACE study found that the higher the ACE score, the greater the likelihood of current smoking. The psychoactive benefits of nicotine are well established in the medical literature although they are little remembered. Are smoking and its related diseases the result of self-treatment of concealed problems that occurred in childhood?

- COPD

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) has a strong relationship to ACE score, as does the early onset of regular smoking. A person with an ACE score of 4 is 260% more likely to have COPD than is a person with an ACE score of 0.

- Intravenous Drug Use

The study found that the relationship of iv drug use and adverse childhood experiences is powerful and graded at every step. For instance a male child with an ACE score of 6 has a 4,600% increase in the likelihood of later becoming an iv drug user when compared to a male child with a score of 0.

- Attempted Suicide

The study found that an individual with an ACE score of 4 was 460% more likely to be suffering from depression than an individual with an ACE score of 0. At higher ACE scores the prevalence of attempted suicide increases by 3,000 to 5,100%. In fact, using the technique of population attributable risk, the study found that between 2/3rds and 80% of all attempted suicides could be attributed to adverse childhood experiences.

- Hepatitis: 240% increase for those with an ACE score of 4 compared to 0.

- Sexually transmitted diseases: 250% increase for ACE of 4 compared to 0.

In addition, the study found other strong graded relationships to what happened in childhood: heart disease, fractures, diabetes, obesity, unintended pregnancy, and alcoholism were all more frequent. Occupational health and job performance worsened progressively as the ACE score increased as well.

What are the implications?

It cannot be said that every addiction or chronic health condition has its roots in an adverse childhood experience. However, this research does give pause to reconsider the development of addictions and chronic self-diminishing behaviors. The research

demonstrates that the strong emotional charge associated with early adverse experiences (birth to 18) affects human emotional and social development as well as physiology throughout life. A friend or family member may ask why someone they care about deeply continues harmful habits to self and others. Physicians or any service provider trying to help people get well or improve their circumstances may ask similar questions. Surely these folks can see their habits are self-destructive and self-defeating, so why not stop. This research opens a wider vista on these questions. Many of these issues have deep underlying causes that must be addressed in order to make changes and acknowledging these issues is not easy. There is shame and embarrassment. It has been suggested that different questions need to be added to standard health intake histories. Questions such as those in the short form 10 question ACE survey, which are more personal, but also allow physicians and other professionals to acknowledge these painful experiences as a means to move forward with effective referral and treatment.

Both primary researchers of the ACE study, Dr. Vincent J. Felitti & Dr Robert F. Anda, have given presentations in Lake County and remain tireless in getting the word out to the general population and service providers about the significance of these findings. Dr. Felitti suggested one way to begin getting the word out is to make the 10 question survey available to the public. Making it available online enables it to be taken in the privacy of one's home and to acknowledge that these experiences may have been part of personal history. The act of acknowledgment is essential for healing. Thus, it is hoped putting the survey into print will increase awareness and open the path to personal healing. Naturally, ACE scores are not at the core of every life challenge, but it's important to broaden understanding of the role that unhealed emotions play in on-going life struggles. Specifically, it is hoped this information will be useful in the prevention of child abuse and other adverse experiences as communities and society at large grasp the long-term, often tragic repercussions that waste away human potential and erode resources.

Taking the survey:

We invite you to participate in completing the anonymous ACE survey online. Simply answering the questions can be insightful. To discuss this further you may wish to follow-up with a trusted physician, clergy, counselor, or connect to a family support program via Lake Family Resource Center by calling 262.1611 or to Healthy Start at 994.0669.

Survey results will be tabulated by the survey monkey and tallied without any reference to specific individuals. The results will assist service providers in learning more about the prevalence of ACEs in our community and what kind of services and programs will be most useful in addressing these issues.

Survey follows

Prior to your 18th birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**:
Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you?
or, Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt? Yes_____ No_____
If yes, enter 1_____

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often or very often**....
Push, grab, slap or throw something at you?
or, **Ever** hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured? Yes_____ No_____
If yes, enter 1_____

3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you **ever**....
Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?
or, Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you? Yes_____ No_____
If yes, enter 1_____

4. Did you **often or very often** feel that....
No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?
or, Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

5. Did you **often or very often** feel that...
You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?
or, Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you
needed it?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

6. Was a biological parent **ever** lost to you through divorce, abandonment, or other reason?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

7. Was your mother or stepmother:
Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?
or, **Sometimes, often, or very often** kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?
or, **Ever** repeatedly was hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt
suicide?
Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

10. Did a household member go to prison? Yes_____ No_____ If yes, enter 1_____

Now add up your "YES" answers_____. This is your ACE score.