



Early Childhood Adversity and the Impact on Health

Early childhood adversity and toxic stress is widely recognized as an important contributor to physical and mental health challenges throughout a person's life. Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, or parental substance abuse increase the risk for poor outcomes such as obesity, depression, and suicide. Studies done in Wisconsin have shown that 58% of the adult population report having experienced at least 1 ACE, and 14% report having experienced 4 or more. *

It is vital that health care providers understand the prevalence and impact of ACEs in order to provide optimal care to patients and families, from infancy through adulthood. One of the most important things to recognize is the signs and symptoms of toxic stress, which present differently throughout the lifespan, and can be subtle or mimic the symptoms of other conditions. Patients and families are not always forthcoming about past adversity, so asking the right questions can help to elicit this important history.

Patients with a history of toxic stress often have developed certain coping mechanisms to help them better deal with their past adversity. Sometimes these adaptive coping mechanisms can make a patient challenging to care for. Viewing a challenging encounter in the context of a patient's past adversity helps reframe why a patient may not be following health recommendations or having a difficult time managing their health, or the health of their child.

Providing care for patients and families being mindful of potential past adversity and how this adversity may be affecting their behavior and decisions today is the art of practicing Trauma-Informed Care. This approach has the potential to strengthen the patient-provider relationship and in turn positively impact health and mental health outcomes for patients.

Below is a link to an educational resource specifically designed for health care providers who are interested in learning more about ACEs, the long-term impact of toxic stress, and promoting resilience in patients through the practice of Trauma-Informed Care. The module includes practical strategies that can be integrated into a current practice, and that have been shown to positively impact the patient-provider experience.

http://cupublic.chw.org/Media/ACEsToxicStressTIC4Pediatricians/index_AICC.html

If you are interested in more information or training resources on this topic please feel free to contact Dr. Kelly Hodges, Co-Consulting Medical Director of the CCHP Care4Kids Foster Care Medical Home Program at khodges@chw.org.

*Source: Children's Trust Fund, Wisconsin ACE Brief, 2011-2012 Dat