

Two-generation Approach to ACEs



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are often intergenerational, meaning that the children of parents with ACEs can be at greater risk themselves. Part of the reason for this situation is that parents who have experienced trauma in their childhoods, absent key protective factors, may have developed an overactive stress response, which can increase their risk for both physical, mental, and behavioral health concerns. These health issues can tax a family's resources and interfere with a parent's ability to be a healthy buffer for their child. In addition, parents with an overactive stress response may have more difficulty managing stress and emotions and self-regulating in a healthy manner when engaging with their kids, which can affect their parenting practices. This dynamic may create an additional vulnerability in parent-child interactions and a higher risk of adverse outcomes, and can perpetuate the intergenerational cycle. This intergenerational aspect is particularly important as *nurture* (the environment) shapes *nature* (genes) via gene expression—a process called "epigenetics." This process can put children with ACEs at higher risk for disease and other harmful health conditions throughout life. This is because the biochemical effects of chronic stress, absent protective factors, can be toxic to a child's healthy development.

Accordingly, early identification of ACEs in pediatric settings is essential, as caring for the health of a child means paying close attention to the health and well-being of the child's adult caregiver. Effectively addressing ACEs involves a two-generational approach to reduce the dose of adversity and enhance the ability of the caregiver to buffer their child's stress. This approach provides support for both children and their parents, with a goal of *breaking the intergenerational cycle*.

Why a two generation approach?

- Improving awareness, providing parenting education, and mental health screenings enhance the likelihood that caregivers will get the support they need.
- When parents and other caregivers receive support and other needed services, physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes for children can improve.
- If parents build a positive, loving relationship with their child, it creates a buffer that can protect the child, interrupt the intergenerational cycle, and reduce the impact of trauma.

All parents hope that their children will experience a higher quality of life than they have had. Research shows that a parent's education, economic stability, and general health can have significant impact on a child's welfare and path in life. Without awareness, parents who have unaddressed ACEs can unknowingly impair their child's life trajectory. That is why protective factors, described below, are vital for children to thrive.

A parent–child approach to providing care

The entire family benefits when you address the needs of the family system. This care entails paying attention to the needs of the child, the parents, and the quality of their relationship. This approach recognizes that a child’s health and well-being is directly affected by that of their caregivers and that parent wellness is an integral part of setting optimal conditions for the child to thrive. In this type of two-generation model, the quality of the attachment between the parent and child is continually assessed and supported.

How to implement a two-generation approach

- Identify parental health conditions such as anxiety or depression that may negatively impact their parenting, their children, or both.
- Assess social determinants of health, including parent mental health and the ACEs of both the child and their parents.
- Inform parents about the impact of their social–emotional and mental health on their child.
- Share the positive effects and protective factors of a healthy parent–child attachment.
- Discuss the ways in which empathy and responsive care can support healthy development of the child’s brain and body and protect her from stressful events. Note that *the number one protective factor* for a child’s development is the presence of a loving, caring adult caregiver to buffer the biochemical impact of the toxic stress response.
- Discuss the importance of protective lifestyle factors, such as supportive relationships, healthy nutritional choices, exercise, sleep, mindfulness, and mental health support.

When parents learn healthy ways to manage stress, develop positive problem-solving skills, build strong social connections, and learn about parenting strategies as well as the basics of child development, they have better emotional and intellectual resources to enhance their own health and well-being, as well as that of their child and family. Behavioral health providers have an important opportunity to help parents better understand the critical role they play in shaping their child’s life and long-term health, and they can offer key skills and support as parents navigate new ways to guide and nurture their children towards a healthy, happy, and productive life.

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