

Parenting with ACEs



As an adult, you may still feel the effects of your own Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). What does this mean for your own health? This depends on how many ACEs you experienced as a child. It *also* depends on whether you've had certain positive experiences that help reduce the effects of stress. These positive experiences are known as "protective factors." Did a friend, family member, or mental health care professional provide support during your childhood? Do you have a good support system in place now? These experiences help reduce the effects of ACEs. The impact of ACEs also depends on factors such as how you personally manage stress. Let's start by talking about how stress works.

The stress response

Your body's stress response is designed to help you survive. When you sense danger or any kind of threat, your body's natural reaction is to increase blood pressure and heart rate so you have the energy to run or fight back. Another reaction is to freeze and shut down. These reactions are your body's way of trying to keep you safe. When used from time to time, these stress responses work well. However, when you experience frequent or severe stress during childhood, your body may learn to respond to small problems as if they were big ones. This could be why little things, even a toddler's tantrum or spilled milk, can feel overwhelming. It can also explain why you may sometimes feel anxious and threatened even when in a safe and calm place. When you're only a little stressed, you may feel alert, aware, and able to cope well. But when you become overly stressed, you may feel panicked and anxious. You may also feel numb, exhausted, or emotionally drained.

Parenting is demanding, and it can easily trigger this stress response. Very simply, because of how brains and bodies react to stress, it's harder to process information when stress levels are too high. You may experience feelings of *stress overload* such as:

- difficulty calming down
- poor judgment
- a quicker-than-normal temper and feelings of impatience
- difficulty thinking logically
- a limited ability to "read" others and judge the needs of your children
- difficulty modeling good skills and behavior for your children.

Breaking the ACEs Cycle

Some adults who had ACEs when they were children have a harder time providing a safe and nurturing environment for themselves and their children. In addition, being a parent with ACEs can increase the risk that your children will also have ACEs. It's important to know about this connection. Ensuring that you and your child live in a safe, trusting, and healthy environment is one of the most important steps you can take to protect your child. If you need resources, your health care provider or a mental health professional can help.

The good news!

Although people with ACEs may be at higher risk for many health issues, it's never too late to get support! Because bodies and brains are constantly growing and changing, things you do to improve your health *today* can make a *big difference* over time! Learning healthy ways to cope with stress and build resilience can help. This skill-building means developing healthy habits for stress management now that improve your ability to handle difficult situations *in the future*. Also, learning about what's age-appropriate for your children can give you perspective when their behavior is challenging.



How to reduce the effects of ACEs

Many lifestyle changes can help reduce the effects of ACEs. Relationships with other supportive adults can help your brain and body *turn down the stress response* and build resilience. Making time to relax, engage in a fulfilling hobby, or participate in a fun activity can help a lot, too! Good sleep habits, healthy eating, and regular exercise are other important tools to manage stress. Mindfulness practices can also help. Some parents find it helpful to seek out mental health professionals for their own exposure to ACEs and trauma. Talk to your own doctor about the health risks associated with ACEs at your next medical visit. Together, these protective factors can help *improve the health and well-being* of your whole family!

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